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EXISTENTIAL**

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THE LURE OF THE NORMAL: WHO WOULDN'T WANT TO BE A MUTANT?

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In the third X-Men movie, *The Last Stand*, a “cure” is discovered that suppresses the activity of the mutant gene, turning mutants into ordinary humans.¹ Storm, the weather-controller, reacts by asking, “Who would want this cure? I mean, what kind of coward would take it just to fit in?” Meanwhile, Rogue—whose touch can sap the life, energy, and abilities of other people—is preparing her trip to the pharmaceutical clinic.

Given the prejudice, fear, and persecution of mutants, some X-fans empathize with Rogue and can easily imagine wanting to be regular people. But other fans, especially those who have idealized or identified with the X-Men, roll their eyes and shake their heads about Rogue’s decision, seeing in it the rejection of something glorious, unique, and desirable. Why would anyone choose the ordinary, the mundane, over the fantastic and the extraordinary? What kind of person wouldn’t want to be a mutant?

Many of these issues revolve around the idea of the “normal.” In philosophy, we make a distinction between the “descriptive” use of a word, which simply points to how a word is neutrally used to explain or characterize something, and the “prescriptive” use of a word, in which the term is used to indicate how something should be. The idea of “normal” can be used in both ways. As a description, it merely indicates that some condition is statistically average, as in, “Normally, humans have twenty-twenty vision,” or, “Normally, people don’t get angry about petty things.” As a prescription, however, it indicates that something should be the case or should be done in a statistically average way, as in, “Her vision isn’t normal, so she needs glasses,” or, “It’s not normal to get so angry over small stuff; there must be something wrong with him.”

Whether the “normal” is a descriptive or a prescriptive idea, though, is a matter of debate. Is it true that just because something is normal, it should be our goal, our yardstick for how things should be? Does normality give us any guidelines? Or, is “normal” merely the way things statistically happen to be? And can we think of ways to make things much better?

What can the X-Men teach us about how the idea of “normality” works to shape and direct human lives? Is normality something to be valued or something to be transcended? Should a mutant’s desire to be normal be congratulated or looked down on? What about our own desire to be normal or to be extraordinary?

The Paradoxes of Normality

For starters, there are only a limited number of ways to be normal: to fall within a small range around the average score for various traits, whether physical, mental, or social. But there are an unlimited number of ways to be abnormal. Not only can you be an extreme from average, but the way in which that extremity manifests can be wildly varied. Whereas you might be unusually

talented, that talent could be specific to thousands of different areas—for example, an ability to play the many different types of musical instruments or sports or excel in the arts or the vocations. You might also be specifically deficient in one or more of thousands of areas. Whereas normality by definition requires the appearance of normality, your abnormalities might be visible or invisible, blatant or subtle, beneficial or detrimental.

Here the basic paradox of normality in the human species arises. On the one hand, we are social beings who feel a strong need to fit into a group (even “nonconformists” usually hang out with similar “nonconformists”—goths with goths, emos with emos, queers with queers), so there is a powerful desire to fit within an acceptable range. You don’t want to stand out. On the other hand, we also want to attract attention to distinguish ourselves from others, so that we don’t get ignored. These conflicting desires may both stem from a basic evolutionary pressure: the drive to be seen as reproductively attractive. We want to be normal enough to indicate to potential mates that there is nothing wrong with us—we don’t have defective genes. But we also want to attract more attention than our competitors and indicate that we have some advantage over others—we have better genes or more social status.

It’s a conundrum of the human condition: we want to fit in and we want to stand out. But there are lots of ways to stand out, some ways better than others. Some of these ways indicate to others that we are desirable; some indicate that we are undesirable.

The X-Men are mostly human, although they often refer to themselves as “mutants” and distinguish themselves from those whom they call “humans.” For the most part, they have ordinary human brains and personalities housed in bodies that possess extraordinary abilities and qualities. Not surprisingly, then, they fall prey to all the vagaries of the ordinary human condition, including the desire to fit in and the desire to stand out. But the mutant gene has many effects, and these various

effects in the mutant population demonstrate something about ordinary variation in human beings—namely, that being ordinary is largely a safe bet, whereas being extraordinary is very, very risky. When you pull a ticket for being different out of a hat, given the infinite ways you could be different, you run a risk.

How to Be Abnormal

When Storm asks why anyone would want to “cure” mutation, the blue-furred scientist Hank McCoy (aka Beast) responds, “Is it cowardice to save oneself from persecution? Not all of us can fit in so easily. You don’t shed on the furniture.” Clearly, there are distinctions to be made even among the mutants, even among the abnormal. Some mutants can pass as “normals” because of their appearance and capacity to control their abilities, such as psychic Jean Grey or sheathed-clawed Wolverine. Other mutants, however, are unable to pass as normal humans. And even these can be further distinguished. Some cannot pass because of their appearance, such as furry blue Beast or blue and devil-tailed Nightcrawler or winged Angel. Others cannot completely pass because of their incapacity to control their abilities, such as Rogue, who cannot touch anyone, or Cyclops, who can never show his eyes.

This concept of passing—successfully pretending to be normal—is an important and well-documented real-life experience among homosexuals and light-skinned African Americans. It gives the abnormal (the term here is understood to be simply descriptive) the ability to be treated as normal and thus can allow them to confront, or not confront, their own difference on their own schedules.

So within the range of the abnormal, we have a variety of possibilities of responding to the normal. Though exemplified in the extreme by mutants, these are familiar to many real humans as well. You could have an abnormality (the term here is used descriptively, simply to mean “statistically rare”) that is

beneficial (say, the ability to heal quickly, such as Wolverine). You could have an abnormality that is detrimental (say, a disability such as Professor Xavier's paraplegia). You could have an abnormality that is detectable (say by sight, touch, or smell) but is easy to keep hidden, for example, a third kidney, a photographic memory, or Shadowcat's phasing ability. You could also have an undetectable abnormality that causes distress when you attempt to hide it: say, a minority sexual orientation or social anxiety or Jean Grey's unruly telepathy. Maybe you have a detectable abnormality that causes distress, such as a missing limb, a deformity, or Nightcrawler's tail and three-fingered hands. There's also the detectable abnormality that causes no distress, such as Colossus's muscle-bound physique or Emma Frost's beauty.

To understand this more clearly, imagine the range of abnormality represented in a graph—not a two-dimensional graph, but a three-dimensional one, a cube, with the x -axis (width) representing the degree of utility, or how beneficial/detrimental the abnormality is; the y -axis (height) representing acceptability, or how the abnormality is received by society as desirable or undesirable; and the z -axis (depth) representing detectability, or how obvious/hidden the abnormality is. This doesn't in any way fully describe the psychological and social complexity of being abnormal (it doesn't even try to explain how your own personality might deal with being abnormal or specify in what way an ability might be detectable or used, for instance), but it is a start in helping you see what a range of experience you could have. Any trait outside the norm could fit anywhere within this space.

Now you can understand how falling in different places in the space can affect your attitude toward how good or bad it is to be normal. The philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984) described the history of the abnormal as beginning with the broad concept of the “monster” (a grand mix of the unnatural and the impossible) and moving on to the concept of the “individual to be corrected” (a more narrow medical and legal idea of humans who

need to be fixed).² Much of Foucault's historical lesson is about how society handles the abnormal, but it can also be related to how any individual perceives his or her own abnormality. Are you a monster, someone needing to be fixed, or just different?

Storm despises as moral cowards people who would seek a cure for their mutations, but look at her experience and where she fits in that 3-D graph. Her mutation gives her the power to control the weather but is not in any way detectable unless she wants you to see it. The ability has great utility: it can be used for a wide variety of desirable goals. Weather control is mixed on the acceptability axis—some people may fear her power, but given the fact that she has control over it and it is not obvious, those who rate her ability low on acceptance don't ever need to know she is a mutant. As with many of the mutants, Storm is exceedingly beautiful, with a perfect physique and face. This abnormality is highly detectable but also highly acceptable and useful. In short, her particular location in the 3-D space means that Storm primarily benefits from her abnormalities and can always pass as someone normal when she chooses to.

Rogue, who is seeking a cure, is not so lucky. She is beautiful, healthy, and charming, but her mutation is complicated. She absorbs the energy, memories, and abilities of the people (abilities especially in the case of mutants) whom she touches, harming each person touched in the process. But she cannot control her power. Touch activates the transfer, regardless of her will. So, while in certain cases Rogue's ability may be useful, it is largely unacceptable and is largely detectable. Although Rogue can "pass" as an ordinary human for a while, she can do so only by avoiding all touch. This makes her seem quirky after a while and eventually downright strange. It also means that Rogue is unable to engage in certain activities that her otherwise very ordinary human brain and personality want to engage in. She wants, as anyone would, to be able to touch. She wants to kiss a boy, to have a mother stroke her face, to hug a friend. Her ability prevents her from having basic human

experiences. No wonder Rogue wants to be normal! She is caught in a terrible situation: she has normal desires and needs but uncontrollable abilities that prevent her from satisfying those desires and needs.

Beast is another whose abnormality is not as beneficial as Storm's. He is blue and furry, so his mutation is highly detectable. Although his abilities (agility, strength, heightened senses) may be very useful, his appearance is perceived as scary, ugly, monstrous. Unlike Storm, Jean Grey, Wolverine, or Iceman, he cannot pass as normal.

Unfortunately, *The Last Stand* is not as informative as we would like it to be about why a mutant might want to be cured. For that information, let's turn to the comic book by Joss Whedon, which covers a version of the cure story.³ Whereas in the film, the mutants who lined up for the cure look mostly normal, in the comic book there is a mix of those who could pass as normal and those who could not. Of course, in pictures, you can pick out only physical characteristics, but this is enough. The mutants who line up in the comic have scales, wings sticking out from beneath jackets, lobster claws for hands, and so on. One mutant actually has his face in his stomach, and in the testing lab, a girl has nightmares that come to life and kill those around her.

Perhaps no place in the X-Men universe is this problem of obvious abnormality explored better than in the story of the Morlocks, a group of mutants who mostly have very obvious and unsightly mutations.⁴ They have chosen to live underground—a realm that befits their rejection by both normal society and mutants who can pass. In one story, the Morlocks have kidnapped the physically beautiful and winged Angel to be a husband and a consort for the leader of the Morlocks, Callisto. One of the Morlocks, Sunder, asks the others why they are fighting other mutants. He finds this strange since “they’re mutants, like us.” Another of the Morlocks, a mutant called Masque who is hideously deformed but possesses the

ability to reshape others' bodies and faces into whatever form he wishes, says, "Not like us, Sunder. They pretty! Hate 'em. Want to hurt 'em!" Masque even thinks of Nightcrawler—the blue-skinned, three-fingered, three-toed, devil-tailed teleporter—as "pretty" and wants to turn him inside out. Of course, this is ironic, considering that Nightcrawler is one of the mutants who cannot pass as normal. In the comic book, Callisto asks Nightcrawler to join the Morlocks since he is so obviously not human, and in the film *X2* Nightcrawler asks shape-shifter Mystique, herself usually blue and scaled, why she doesn't stay in a normal human shape all the time.

Some people may wish they had a Morlock's powers, but few, if any, wish to look like a Morlock. Why? Partly because we function with a cultural and evolutionary sense of what counts as attractive and thus find the abnormalities of the Morlocks "ugly." Also, because no matter what abilities they might have, people know if they looked like Morlocks, they would be despised by normal humans, perhaps even by normal-looking mutants. Angels and devils both have powers, but angels are prettier.

What most people seem to want, then, and this is part of the reason they might fantasize about being an X-Man, is to be different in a way that makes them stand out, but only in terms of being powerful, beautiful, and able to pass when desired. Some people might want to have abnormally good looks, abnormally high athletic ability, or an abnormally healthy immune system, but they would not want anything that inhibited them socially or physically. People want to stand out, and fit in, on conventional terms. How very normal, then, to want to be unusual only if it benefits us.

"Normal" Anxiety

Fantasy and science fiction provide an escape from the normal, allowing us to imagine the richness of a life that is enhanced

by having special abilities and extraordinary experiences. We imagine the great and wonderful things we could do if only we weren't so limited, so ordinary. And it is no mere stereotype that the creators of works in speculative fiction and film have themselves often felt as if they didn't fit into society, thus turning to worlds in which characters who did not fit in were magnificent and enviable.

It is curious and telling, however, that so much of the fiction about the extraordinary belies an anxiety about normality and about abnormality. Characters routinely lament their special status and give long-winded monologues on how they just want to set aside the unique lives they experience and return to or become quintessential "average" people. We also find that the most evil or dangerous characters are most likely to cling to their differences, despising the normality of others as limiting them to banal experience, as with Magneto's insistence in *X-Men United* that mutants are "homo superior" and are as "gods among insects."⁵ It's as if, at the same time that we envy the extraordinary or the uncanny, we also want to express our anxiety about being the outlier, about being special. There is excitement about being unusual, but there is also great comfort in being ordinary—which is often, and ironically, expressed by describing the normal person as having access to some experience that the extraordinary person cannot have (Rogue watching with envy as a mother caresses a child's skin, or Beast looking longingly at his ordinary unfurry hand when his mutation is temporarily suppressed). Somehow, we want to try to value the very ordinariness of life that science fiction and fantasy give us an escape from. Are we not perhaps trying to comfort ourselves, while at the very same time, *escaping* ourselves?

But not all of the anxiety about the uncanny and the extraordinary is science fiction. What about the real-world attempt to use technology to change into something extraordinary? Is such a desire understandable, even praiseworthy? Or is such a desire to be met with skepticism, horror, or even

condemnation? We live on the edge of a world in which genetic engineering, pharmacological manipulation, and cybernetic implants open up the opportunity for a person to become something like a real mutant. Soon, perhaps, we may be able to alter ourselves to achieve what some fictional mutants possess: greater strength, intelligence, agility, immunity, longevity (though probably not weather control). Is this a bad thing? Is it wrong to push ourselves outside the limits of what is human? Transhumanists don't think so.

The transhumanist movement wants to use technology to enhance human beings, to push us beyond our biological limits until we become something grander and more transcendent.⁶ Not surprisingly, transhumanists tend to adore the X-Men and most probably think Rogue is misguided to seek a cure for mutation.

Contrasting with transhumanists are "bioconservatives," who advocate conserving the normal biological status of human beings. One group of bioconservatives consists of natural law theorists. "Natural law" argues that morality comes from the given needs, abilities, and limitations we have as humans and says that trying to change human nature is the worst sort of pride and arrogance.⁷

So here we have two groups that already have real-world answers to the question of "Who wouldn't want to be a mutant?" Transhumanists don't want to be a certain kind of mutant—not the deformed or the weak or the kind of abnormal that interferes with living—but they love the idea of being extraordinary in all of the beautiful and powerful ways one could imagine. Bioconservatives don't want to be any sort of mutant at all. For them, the normal is a moral obligation.

But, of course, the "normal" is relative. If we all become extraordinary, then by comparison won't we end up simply being ordinary again? If everyone can fly, is flying special? This is where the tricky part of normality and abnormality comes into play. When we value something—an ability, a capacity, a trait—for what it can allow us to do, then possessing

that ability may be reward enough. But sometimes, we value an ability or a trait only because others do not have it. Compare being healthy and being tall. Everyone could be healthy—no diseases, no injuries—and we would all benefit from being so. But everyone cannot be tall, because “tall” is a comparative idea. You are only “tall” in relation to someone who is shorter than you. Everyone could be 6 feet 5 inches high, but then 6’5” would be standard, not “tall.” So we need to ask ourselves when we desire something whether we want it because it would benefit us no matter what or because it would benefit us only by comparison to someone who doesn’t have it. The answer to that question partly determines whether we are acting on behalf of all humanity or acting only on behalf of ourselves. If you want to fly, even if everyone else could fly, too, then flying for you is valuable no matter what. But if you want to be able to become invisible only if others could not become invisible, then you are merely seeking a relative advantage. We could also ask a similar question about people’s desire to be normal. Do they want to be normal because being abnormal (in the “greater ability” sense of the X-Men) would impose greater responsibilities on them and they don’t want such responsibilities? Do they want to feel justified in not having to fight evil all the time? Funny. We might obviously be selfish in our desire to be extraordinary, but we might also be selfish in our desire to be normal. It makes you think . . .

So, there are your answers to the title question “Who wouldn’t want to be a mutant?”—people who are limited by their abnormalities, people who are ostracized because of their abnormalities, and even people who don’t want the responsibility that comes with having certain abnormalities. There can be great comfort in being normal, even if it is sometimes at the cost of never standing out.

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) once wrote, “Man is something that should be overcome. What have you done to overcome him? All creatures hitherto have created

something beyond themselves: and do you want to be the ebb of this great tide, and return to animals rather than overcoming man?"⁸ Although in context, Nietzsche's character Zarathustra is preaching about humanity's religious experience, the general idea is well admired by transhumanists. They see humanity and its current normal range as something to be overcome, something that oppressively limits us. Our minds, curiously not as constrained as our bodies, can imagine what it would be like to be very different from what we are. Is this not obvious in the case of the fictional X-Men? We can imagine ourselves with abilities beyond what we can actually do. The question is, What is our motivation for wanting to overcome man? And equally important, What is our motivation for *not* wanting to?

NOTES

1. See director Brett Ratner's *X-Men: The Last Stand* (20th Century Fox, 2006), DVD.
2. Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the College de France 1974–1975* (New York: Picador, 2003).
3. Joss Whedon, *Astonishing X-Men, Vol. 1: Gifted* (New York: Marvel, 2004).
4. Chris Claremont, *The Uncanny X-Men* #169 (New York: Marvel, 1983).
5. See director Bryan Singer's *X2: X-Men United* (20th Century Fox, 2003), DVD.
6. See www.transhumanism.org/index.php/MTA/index/.
7. Patrick Hopkins, "Natural Law," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006), chap. 6, pp. 505–517.
8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (New York: Penguin Books USA, 1969), p. 41.