

ESSAY XXV

Conformity and the Construction of Normality

Habit, Approval, and the Boundary Between Difference and Defect

VOCABOR SILENTII

ABSTRACT

Normality can describe frequency, functional adequacy, conformity to a convention, or moral approval. Arguments become unstable when a conclusion established in one register is used to govern another. This essay examines that movement and proposes a requirement of explicit justification whenever descriptive classification acquires corrective authority. It distinguishes the explanation of conformity from the justification of a norm, and the construction of a category from the fabrication of the reality it classifies. Engaging Bicchieri's account of social norms, Hacking's analysis of interactive classifications, and Canguilhem's treatment of the normal and the pathological, the essay develops an argument about the burden carried by classifications that alter opportunities and self-understanding. A hypothetical institution's definition of the reliable participant demonstrates how measurement can confuse conformity with the performance it is supposed to assess. Counterarguments concerning safety, coordination, administrative feasibility, and the value of disciplined practice limit the analysis. The conclusion is not that standards should disappear, but that difference becomes a defect only relative to a specified function or justified norm, neither of which can be supplied by the word normal alone.

Keywords: normality; conformity; classification; social norms; measurement; difference; functional standards; correction

Conceptual analysis and critical reconstruction. Cases introduced as illustrations are hypothetical, not empirical findings.

1. The judgment hidden inside an ordinary word

Suppose an institution describes a reliable participant as someone who speaks readily in meetings, responds immediately to messages, and attends informal gatherings. It measures these behaviors and reports that one participant falls below the normal range. The individual completes the agreed work accurately and on time but communicates primarily in writing and declines social events. Is the person unreliable, unconventional, poorly matched to a particular environment, or being judged by a defective measure? The answer depends on what the institution claims to know and what it intends to do with the classification.

This is an illustrative case, not a report of a measured organizational practice. It isolates a common conceptual possibility: an institution can identify a genuine difference while misdescribing its significance. The recorded behaviors may be accurate. The conclusion can still fail if the measured traits are not adequate indicators of reliability or if a particular style of participation has been mistaken for the function itself. Precision of measurement does not repair an unspecified evaluative premise.

The word normal is especially capable of concealing that premise. It can mean that a trait is frequent, that a system functions adequately, that conduct follows an established convention, or that a life merits approval. These meanings sometimes coincide, but their coincidence requires explanation. An uncommon ability need not be defective. A familiar practice need not be justified. A departure from an average need not obstruct a relevant function. Conversely, something does not become harmless or valuable merely because it is unusual.

The essay's central claim is therefore a requirement of explicit transition. When a descriptive classification is used to justify correction, exclusion, treatment, or sanction, the additional evaluative reasoning must be stated. What function is being protected? What harm is identified? What standard is relevant? Which alternatives are possible? Without such answers, normality becomes an authority-bearing word whose apparent simplicity conceals several unresolved judgments.

2. Four senses of normality

Statistical normality concerns a distribution. A trait can be common, typical, near a mean, or within a selected reference interval. These descriptions are not interchangeable, and none alone establishes what ought to be done. A mean is an arithmetic property of data, not a command to reproduce it. A reference interval depends on how the reference population and measurement have been specified. These are elementary features of classification rather than reasons to reject quantitative inquiry.

Functional normality concerns whether something performs an identified activity adequately. Its evaluation requires an account of function, circumstances, and acceptable performance. A tool can depart from average dimensions and still work exceptionally well. A person can accomplish a task through an unusual method. Conversely, an impairment of an important capacity need not become insignificant because it is frequent in a population. Functional assessment and statistical comparison may inform one another without becoming identical.

Conventional normality concerns a shared practice that makes conduct mutually intelligible or coordinated. A greeting, turn-taking rule, or notation system may be replaceable in principle while consequential once adopted. Its contingent origin does not make it pointless. Yet conventions can vary in the costs imposed by deviation. A different greeting may create mild uncertainty; a different signal in a tightly coordinated operation may create serious danger. The practical significance comes from the activity and its dependencies, not simply from the existence of a convention.

Moral normality concerns what is treated as acceptable, admirable, shameful, or blameworthy. Calling something morally normal can report social approval or express an evaluation. Those are different speech acts. A report that a community approves a practice does not demonstrate that the practice deserves approval. Nor does widespread disapproval automatically establish wrongdoing. The normative argument must remain available after the sociology of acceptance has been described.

These distinctions extend the collection's refusal to transfer authority across domains without a new warrant (Silentii 2026a, Essay II). An accurate comparison can establish statistical difference. A valid performance measure can establish functional limitation. Neither automatically settles the person's moral standing or the scope of permissible institutional action. The question is not whether categories exist, but which conclusion each category is capable of supporting.

3. Explaining conformity without justifying the norm

Bicchieri analyzes social norms through conditional preferences and beliefs about others' behavior and expectations. Her distinction between empirical and normative expectations helps separate what people expect others to do from what they believe others expect them to do (Bicchieri 2006, chap. 1). This is an explanatory account of how conformity can be sustained. It does not establish that a norm deserves compliance merely because the relevant expectations exist.

Consider a hypothetical seminar in which every participant privately prefers shorter presentations but assumes that everyone else values elaborate ones. Each speaker lengthens their contribution to meet the anticipated standard. The observable pattern can then reinforce the belief that long presentations are preferred. No individual needs to have designed the result. The example demonstrates a possible discrepancy between behavior and endorsement, not the empirical prevalence of that discrepancy in academic life.

The case matters because behavior is often treated as direct evidence of preference or consent. Conformity may instead reflect anticipated sanctions, uncertainty, strategic accommodation, or a reasonable desire not to disrupt coordination. It may also express genuine agreement. An assessment must distinguish these possibilities rather than infer a complete normative endorsement from one observed act. The evidentiary problem remains even where conduct is voluntary in a minimal sense.

Normative criticism must also avoid the inverse mistake. Showing that conformity responds to expectations does not show that the norm is illegitimate. Keeping an appointment can be both socially expected and justified by another person's reliance. The causal expla-

nation and the moral reason can coincide. The relevant task is to ask whether the practice can be supported by reasons beyond the fact that nonconformity would be noticed or punished.

4. Construction does not mean invention without constraint

A constructed category need not classify an imaginary object. People select measurements, boundaries, terms, and purposes, but what they encounter can resist the classification. An invented unit does not make all measurements equally accurate. A selected performance threshold can be assessed against the activity it is intended to protect. The construction of a category identifies work that requires scrutiny; it does not settle whether the result is adequate.

Canguilhem makes the relation between the normal and the pathological a philosophical problem rather than allowing average occurrence to exhaust evaluation (Canguilhem 1991). The relevant lesson here is limited: judgments about functioning cannot simply be read off frequency. This does not establish that bodily suffering is merely a social label, that biological constraints are unreal, or that every assessment of impairment expresses prejudice. Those would be further claims requiring evidence and argument.

A hypothetical task illustrates the point without making a clinical recommendation. Two people must read the same information. One uses printed text and another an audio rendering. If the function is acquiring the information accurately, a rule requiring print may confuse the familiar means with the relevant end. If the task is proof-reading a visual layout, the means may instead be constitutive of what is being assessed. The significance of the difference depends on the specified function.

Neither the individual nor the institution has automatic sovereignty over that specification. A person cannot make every limitation disappear by redescribing the task. An institution cannot make an irrelevant demand necessary by placing it in a form. The question must be answered through the relationship among purpose, evidence, alternatives, and effects. This is what a constrained construction amounts to: classifications are made, but their adequacy remains answerable to the world and the activity they claim to describe.

5. When classification changes the classified

Hacking's analysis of kinds of people emphasizes that classifications can interact with those classified. People may alter their conduct or self-understanding in response, while institutions and experts revise the category in turn (Hacking 2007). The point is not that every category produces the same effect. It is that a classification applied to persons may enter the situation being investigated rather than merely record it from outside.

Return to the institution's reliable participant. Suppose the classification removes a person from important discussions because their communication is judged insufficiently spontaneous. The person then receives less contextual information and becomes less able to respond immediately. A later measurement appears to confirm the original classification. The hypothetical result is not proof that the person possessed no relevant limitation. It reveals an alternative causal explanation: the intervention may have helped produce the behavior subsequently treated as independent evidence.

This possibility changes the evidentiary burden. An institution assessing the effects of a classification must distinguish prior characteristics from consequences of its own treatment. Otherwise the category can become self-confirming. A person's withdrawal after repeated exclusion may be described as lack of commitment; difficulty complying with an inaccessible process may be described as lack of responsibility. In an actual case, these interpretations require evidence. The conceptual error occurs when the institution refuses in principle to consider its own contribution.

There is a symmetrical risk. Once interactive effects are recognized, every adverse result might be attributed to classification itself. That would also outrun the evidence. Some difficulties precede the label; some persist when treatment changes; some reflect independent conditions. The proper conclusion is methodological rather than universal: causal explanations must allow more than one direction of influence. A category's apparent predictive success should not be insulated from inquiry into how the prediction enters the process that produces its confirmation.

6. A standard must disclose its intended work

A defensible standard begins by identifying what it is for. Reliability might concern the fulfillment of commitments, the accuracy of work, availability during agreed periods, or responsiveness in a time-critical operation. These are distinct requirements. Combining them into an undifferentiated label can obscure which performance matters and why. A person can satisfy one and not another; an institution may need different arrangements for different activities.

The next question is whether the measure tracks that function. A readily counted behavior may serve as a convenient proxy without being a reliable indicator. Immediate replies could indicate attentiveness, interruptions, limited workload, or merely a habit of acknowledging messages before considering them. The example supplies alternative hypotheses, not a factual finding about response times. A measurement practice must establish its own relation to the outcome rather than assuming that countability guarantees relevance.

A third question concerns alternatives. Where a person can perform a function by another route, requiring one conventional method needs an additional justification. That justification may concern interoperability, safety, verification, cost, or the rights of others. It may be substantial. But it cannot be replaced by the assertion that the usual route is normal. The distinction directs disagreement toward the actual reasons instead of treating the person's difference as the answer.

Finally, a standard must state the consequence of falling below it. A modest difference might justify additional instruction, an alternative arrangement, a reassessment, or nonselection for a particular task. It does not necessarily justify a general verdict about character. The classification's scope should match the action being considered. This requirement preserves the possibility of genuine standards while limiting the expansion from local performance to comprehensive social worth.

7. Objection: safety requires rules, not endless exceptions

The strongest objection to criticism of normality concerns coordinated activity. A team performing a time-sensitive operation cannot allow every participant to invent signals or reconsider procedures at the moment of action. Uniformity can be necessary. The objection defeats a romantic account in which difference is automatically emancipatory and discipline automatically oppressive. A practice can require conformity for reasons that remain valid even when the convention itself could originally have been different.

The reply is not to deny the rule but to distinguish its justification from its familiarity. Where a signal has a safety function, the case for conformity rests on predictable coordination and the consequences of deviation. That account can support strong requirements in the relevant setting. It does not automatically authorize uniformity in unrelated speech, appearance, or private life. Precisely because the safety reason is intelligible, its jurisdiction can be described rather than left unlimited.

There may also be differences between revision and violation. A participant can propose changing a protocol through a procedure that preserves coordination during transition. That act is not equivalent to abandoning the protocol without notice. A standard capable of deliberate revision need not become unstable in every application. The distinction prevents current conformity from being treated as an irrevocable endorsement and prevents criticism from becoming an entitlement to impose uncoordinated risk on others.

This reply presupposes that the claimed danger is real enough to warrant the restriction. It does not establish a general permission to override others by invoking safety. In actual cases, the evidence, severity, available alternatives, and allocation of risk must be examined. The word danger can conceal evaluative assumptions as readily as the word normal. Replacing one unexamined term with another would leave the underlying problem intact.

8. Objection: individuality cannot defeat institutional feasibility

A second objection concerns scale. Institutions cannot redesign every process for every person. General rules reduce complexity, and some errors may remain unavoidable. An account demanding perfect fit would be practically empty. The objection is sound against an unlimited principle of individualization, but the argument here requires neither universal exemption nor flawless administration. It requires institutions to identify what their generalizations omit and why the resulting costs are acceptable under the purpose they claim.

Feasibility is itself a relation among resources, priorities, and constraints. A modification can genuinely be too costly, technically impossible, or incompatible with another person's claim. It can also be inconvenient only because existing arrangements are treated as beyond revision. These possibilities cannot be distinguished by vocabulary alone. The institution needs evidence about the proposed change and must avoid presenting every inherited choice as an external necessity.

A third objection concerns the formation of skill. Learning can require repetition, correction, and submission to standards not yet fully understood. A novice cannot always determine which departures are productive. This is a reason for domain-specific educational authority, not proof that all correction is domination. It also suggests a temporal question: does the practice progressively develop competent judgment, or does it preserve dependence by treating independent assessment as a permanent failure of discipline?

Mill's concern with individuality provides a useful contrast to conformity pursued as an end in itself (Mill 1859, chap. 3). But the present argument does not require every person to display originality. A familiar practice may be deliberately chosen and deeply meaningful. Compulsory unconventionality would reproduce the same mistake under a different ideal. The relevant distinction is between a standard justified by its work and one whose principal authority is that a recognizable kind of person already complies with it.

9. Correction, uncertainty, and the person beyond the category

When a classification is challenged, several different responses are possible. The evidence may be wrong while the category remains useful. The category may be too broad while a narrower distinction is defensible. The measure may be accurate but the consequence disproportionate. The institution may lack authority to act even though its description is correct. These possibilities require different corrections. A general demand to abandon labels can conceal the same distinctions as an unqualified defense of existing ones.

Uncertainty must also be allowed a practical form. An institution can decline to issue a comprehensive finding while arranging further assessment or a temporary adjustment. A person can acknowledge a difficulty without accepting the institution's explanation of its cause. Such positions are not contradictions. They separate experience, evidence, interpretation, and action, following the collection's account of experiential authority without experiential infallibility (Silentii 2026a, Essay IX).

The person remains more than the category even when the classification is accurate. A demonstrated limitation can matter decisively for one task without determining the value of a life. A relevant competence can justify participation without conferring superiority in every domain. The same restraint must operate in both directions. Classification becomes philosophically excessive when a limited predicate is allowed to administer the entire subject.

10. Conclusion: the authority that normality cannot supply alone

Normality does not name a single source of authority. Frequency, function, convention, and moral approval answer different questions. Their interaction can be important, but the movement from one to another requires argument. An institution does not establish the need for correction merely by identifying a departure from a selected pattern.

The appropriate alternative is not a world without categories, discipline, or shared expectations. Such a world would also lack many of the practices through which persons can act together. The task is to

make classifications disclose their purpose, evidentiary basis, consequences, and limits, while allowing the classified person's experience to enter without becoming infallible. The institution's contribution to the conditions it measures must remain examinable as well.

Difference becomes a defect relative to a function or norm whose relevance and authority have been established. The word normal cannot perform that work by itself. Once that limitation is recognized, conformity can be assessed without either worshiping it or treating every departure as an achievement. Standards remain possible, but their authority becomes specific rather than automatic.

References

- Bicchieri, Cristina. 2006. *The Grammar of Society: The Nature and Dynamics of Social Norms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [Source](#)
- Canguilhem, Georges. 1991. *The Normal and the Pathological*. Translated by Carolyn R. Fawcett. New York: Zone Books. [Source](#)
- Hacking, Ian. 2007. “Kinds of People: Moving Targets.” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 151: 285–318. [Source](#)
- Mill, John Stuart. 1859. *On Liberty*. London: John W. Parker and Son. Electronic reprint, Project Gutenberg. [Source](#)
- Silentii, Vocabor. 2026a. *The Architecture of Human Order. Part One: Foundations of Thought, Meaning, and Human Agency*. Revised and expanded edition. Author-supplied manuscript.