

BOOK REVIEW: THE MYTH OF NORMAL - GABOR MATÉ

Eugênio Lopes¹

UNED: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8474-3538>

DOI: 10.21680/1982-1662.2024v7n40ID35118

Resenha: MATÉ, Gabor. *The Myth of Normal*. New York: Penguin, 2022.

When we talk about the human person, in particular about his body, we generally tend to fall into two extremes, or rather, into two types of reductionism: monism and dualism. While the first focuses exclusively on this component of the human person, thus showing that the human person is nothing more than his body, therefore abdicating or neglecting his other component, the mind or soul, the second, on the other hand, dissociates in the human person his body from his mind, thus conferring, in this sense, an exclusivity to this component to the detriment of the other, reaching, in some cases, to overshadow the first. When we talk about the human mind, we have also to mention the intellect, the will and the affectivity, the spiritual components of the human person. However, when we talk about these components we can also fall into some types of reductionism: for example, we can give primacy to one of these components neglecting the other components or we can dissociate them, and, in this way, not to establish a relationship between them.

Focusing in particular on human affectivity, one of the most misunderstood faculties of the human person, we can also commit some mistakes when we approach it and, in this way, fall into some reductionism: for example, one, typical of psychologism, gives primacy to this component of the human person, thus neglecting his other components, which are equally indispensable to guarantee his self-fulfillment. Another, rationalism itself, always considers affectivity as an irrational component, which also negatively conditions the self-fulfillment of the human person. On the other hand, voluntarism seeks to submit affectivity to its power

¹ E-mail: lopes_eugenio@hotmail.com

in order to fulfill itself.

When we also talk about the human person, people equally often tend to dissociate or even neglect their “external world” from their “inner world,” conditioning negatively, in this way, the self-fulfillment of every single person. In fact, although these “worlds” are essentially different, they are co-dependent and can establish a relationship between them, and, in this sense, interfere and conditionate the life of every human person. So, considering, in particular, these points, that I have mentioned previously, a “myth of normal”, has been created and introduced in our societies, which is an antithesis to the nature of the human person and, in this sense, is conditional negatively his self-fulfillment, in many aspects of his life, and also the development of society and the next generations.

In this sense, I consider this very readable book, by the renowned physician, Gabor Maté, MD, with a preface by the renowned Bessel van der Kolk, MD, author of the bestseller *The Body Keeps the Score*, is very relevant and important, as it proposes a more realistic view in approaching the different aspects and components of the human person, demystifying the “myth of normal”, and thus avoiding falling into any reductionism. To achieve this goal, the author decided to divide his work into 5 parts (which, in turn, are divided into some chapters).

Thus, in the first part, entitled *Our Interconnected Nature*, Gabor Maté analyzes and lists some entities of the human person, in particular, the mind, the nervous system, genetics, the will, the immune system, affectivity, and the body. In this part, he also establishes a relationship, in particular, between affectivity and the social, economic, family, and professional contexts, the body, and disease. Here, he also analyzes some ethical issues, such as, for example, the relationship between doctor and patient. Subsequently, in the second part, entitled *The Distortion of Human Development*, the author dissects the importance of affective education, especially in childhood. In this sense, he focuses on the importance of establishing virtuous relationships within the family. In this way, the author shows how the type and quality of relationships in childhood have an impact, successively, on the type and quality of relationships that a person establishes in adulthood and, likewise, the impact that this also entails on coming generations.

Later, in the third part, entitled *Rethinking Abnormal: Afflictions as Adaptations*, Maté highlights the importance of building a good personality, identity,

and authenticity. Likewise, he also establishes a relationship between these topics and the importance of the meaning of life. In this part, the author also links these points with illness and addictions. Then, in the fourth part, entitled *The Toxicities of Our Culture*, Gabor Maté not only distinguishes and relates two types of “environments” in the human person, inner and external environment, but also establishes a relationship between society and the self-fulfillment of the human person. In this sense, the author here also examines the disease, relating it to economic, political, social, historical, geographic, and cultural factors. Finally, in the last part, entitled *Pathways to Wholeness*, Maté establishes a relationship between personality and disease. In this way, he not only confers a certain “intelligibility” to the disease, thus showing its importance and function, but also, in this sense, how we should relate and face it.

Of the various positive points that can be highlighted in this work, which give continuity to many of the arguments approached in Gabor Maté’s previous works, I would like to highlight the following. Methodologically speaking, the first one consists in the fact that the author has established an interdisciplinary dialogue between various scientific areas, in particular between philosophy, biology, psychology, neuroscience, sociology, politics, medicine, and education. In this sense, I think the work stands out for bringing several new considerations to several of these areas and may therefore be of interest to several scientists. In the same way, methodologically speaking, it is also positively highlighted in the work that Maté has resorted not only to the thoughts of other authors, from the most varied and different areas of knowledge, but also has used stories of several people, experiments, and statistical data and the history to substantiate and corroborate his ideals. I think the work also excels by demonstrating the limits and errors that can be verified in some authors, areas of knowledge, and previous studies.

Concerning the objectives and the actual content of the work, I would like to highlight the fact that Maté, throughout his work, did not disregard or dissociate in the human person two components that are part of his essence, the mind and the body, invalidating, in this way, any sort of monism or dualism. In this sense, it is highlighted in the work how the author shows that the mind and body, despite being essentially two different entities, can establish a relationship with each other. This reasoning, the author also establishes between the intellect, the will, and the affectivity, showing how these components, despite being essentially different, can

relate to each other, to guarantee the self-fulfillment of the human person. In this way, I consider also relevant in the book how the author has criticized and objected, in general, to some reductionisms that are committed when people approach these entities.

Concerning affectivity, more specifically, I consider it important that Maté has shown not only the subjectivity and objectivity found in this component but also its relevance in the life of every human person. As the author shows, affectivity helps us to objectify and better understand reality and, therefore, how we should behave in the face of this same reality. In this sense, when speaking about affectivity, I consider it equally important that the author has shown that we should not only be conscious of all our affections but also interpret, integrate, and communicate them. Talking still about affectivity, I also highlight in the work the importance that Gabor Maté has attributed to some effects that, unfortunately, many times, are disregarded but have an extreme impact on the life of every single human being, such as stress and the “gut feelings”. In this line, I consider as well fundamental in this work how the author has analyzed them and how he shows us how we have to objectify and interpret them to guarantee better self-fulfillment. In this way, another point that I consider important to highlight in this work is the fact that Maté pertinently shows how the intellect, the will, the affectivity, the body, genetics, and the nervous, hormonal, and immune systems relate to each other, showing, in this sense, not only the unity of the human person but also that the “whole”, as far as the human person is concerned, is greater than the sum of its “parts”.

Concerning the body, more specifically, I consider it exceptional that Maté has shown that this component, even when we are ill, can help us to better objectify the reality in which we are inserted and, in this sense, how we should behave to guarantee our self-fulfillment. In this sense, following the author's thought, it can be said that the body has also “reasons” that reason itself is unaware of. At the same time, I would like to mention another aspect that is positively evident in this work: the relationship that the author establishes between family, interpersonal relationships, society, and culture, and how they condition the self-fulfillment of the human person, and how they are also often the basis of many illnesses.

In this sense, it is also important to mention the distinction and the relationship that the author establishes between the internal and external “environment”, and how

the external environment is often the basis of many illnesses, and not only the internal environment, as people often tend to think about. I also consider it pertinent that here the author has established a relationship between illnesses and age, gender, social position, style and state of life, and some psychological factors and pharmacology.

Regarding the last point, and in connection with the previous one as well, I would also like to highlight positively in this work how Maté has studied and interpreted illness and, at the same time, demystified some errors that over decades have been committed in the analyses of this reality, in particular, its causes and consequences. Also noteworthy in this work is the fact that Gabor Maté shows the importance of realism, self-knowledge, and, in this way, the necessity of building a good personality, authenticity, identity, and the meaning of life, to be able to fulfill ourselves. In this way, I also highlight the relationship that the author has established between these points.

Another positive point of the work is verified when the author identifies, objects, and counterarguments some ethical issues, often disregarded by societies and cultures and which, likewise, condition our self-fulfillment, in particular, concerning the interpersonal relationships, namely between parents and children, employers and workers, between members of society and between doctors and their patients. However, when the author addresses the issue of abortion, I think that he should have taken an ethical position, because, as he defends and promotes throughout his work, the dignity of the human person is inviolable, reasoning that must have been extended from the moment of his conception until his death.

Bearing in mind the aforementioned points, I also consider it fundamental that Maté has defended that the poor development of the human person, during the various stages of his life, negatively conditions a posteriori that future generations can develop in a good way and, in this way, their self-fulfill, and so on. I also highlight the importance that the author attributes to the need to live a balanced life, self-acceptance, taking care of ourselves, giving, and having to help others to self-realize, in order to build a better society and so on. Considering the last point, I also mention, as a positive point in the book, the fact that the author has focused on how our personality and lifestyles can interfere with future generations and so on. In this way, it was crucial the way on how the author established a sort of “symbiosis”

between the self-fulfillment of each human person, the development of societies and future generations, and so on. Another interesting point in Maté's work is his focus on the analysis of some characteristics and behaviors that the human person should adopt to self-fulfill, as well as how we should behave with other people, to help them in the same way to self-fulfillment. In this way, I consider the book as well very educative and can be easily read, applied, and integrated into the life of every single person.

However, analyzing this work by Gabor Maté, I find that, in the last part, particularly in chapters 31 and 32, the author falls into a type of "spiritualism", thus approaching arguments that cannot be corroborated from a scientific point of view; hence, in this sense, they may easily be objected to. However, since they lack a scientific foundation, I think that such accidental arguments do not condition the essence and quality of the work.

In a period, where there is often a poor or even a bad conception of the human person, thus negatively conditioning our self-fulfillment, I consider that this book by Gabor Maté, which continues and also develops many of his previous studies, presents, in its great majority, a very realistic view of the human person, demystifying in this way "the myth of normal" and so many of these misconceptions that are on the base of "a toxic culture", identifying not only their causes but also their consequences to every single person and also to the societies. If we consider his ideas, I think that many of the evils that hover over ourselves and today's society can be solved, evils which prevent us not only from developing and flourishing ourselves as human beings, but also from creating a better society to welcome the coming generations, so that they, in turn, can also self-fulfill in the best way, and so on. In this way, if I may, I would like to conclude by encouraging Gabor Maté to continue and develop with his research work, which over the years, has positively been done, which is very important as well for the development and fruitful dialogue with the different sciences and areas of knowledge.

Referências

MATÉ, Gabor. *The Myth of Normal*. New York: Penguin, 2022.

Recebido: 17 jan 2024
Aceito: 15 jul 2024