Perfection? I Think Not…

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How nice does a world without anything negative sound? This means no bad grades, no big losses, and even that the girl you have wanted to ask out for a year will naturally say yes. Throughout history people have been striving to attain this type of utopian world—one that is perfect—and this urge to obtain perfection exists in our everyday actions. This drive also comes from the fact that our society is one that looks down upon mistakes and sins and thereby praises flawlessness. However, when we fixate too much on perfection not only does it lose meaning but eventually so does life itself.

From Day One of our existence, people have been trying to rid themselves of mistakes, and by doing so our society has become focused on the avoidance of error. This quest for perfection affects every single aspect of our society, including science, art, sports, and even religion. For example, science remains driven by the quest for knowledge to understand more about our surroundings and ourselves. This is rooted in the belief that not having answers to questions about where we come from or the nature of our existence is bad, and thus scientists create answers that explain the unknowns in our world. But eventually these answers are proven wrong, which causes another person to correct them, and these corrections are then applauded because they are deemed "better" then the previous answers. This "better" in itself implies that the answer is closer to perfect and has fewer flaws then the previous answers. On one hand, we benefit greatly from this "progressive" nature of science. On the other hand, by having this ideal of perfect accuracy drive everything within the sciences, the avoidance of error eventually becomes the primary focus as we strive towards truth. But the failures that were so essential to obtaining the "perfect" answer are never presented and we merely gaze upon the

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shiny final product, and as a result, the imperfect work required to achieve the perfect falls by the wayside.

Another example is religion, which constantly looks down upon sinning—another word for messing up. By establishing rules for people to live their lives by, religions establish the path to being perfect, or as close to perfect as possible. If one follows this path, they can then obtain what each religion sees as perfect. But this is both ironic and contradictory, because each religion gives their followers a different path to achieve perfection. In Buddhism, once one stops craving and removes desire from one's life, one reaches Nirvana. But Christianity states that by following the Bible and acting in the "right" path—as determined by the Ten Commandments—one can go to heaven where one floats in the sky with angels. The problem is that religions across the world have different views about perfection. But if perfection involves having no flaws, why can't the major religions agree on its definition? Setting aside the fact that religions cannot agree on what perfection actually is, we still perceive immense rewards for pursuing perfection. Whether we're urged to get 100% on our tests, which can get us into the "best" college, or we're told to avoid sin, which is our ticket into heaven, our society celebrates the flawless and scorns the flawed. So why shouldn't we try to be perfect?

Despite the scientific, religious and academic benefits that come with aiming for it, a society solely dominated by perfection and the avoidance of mistakes is indeed a terrible one because numerous problems would arise in this case. First off, if the entire world was perfect, it would create a paradox. By absolutely abolishing any sort of error, then error would no longer exist and perfect would just be the norm. By just having good and no evil—which would be eradicated in a perfect world— the world would be even worse off. As contemporary philosopher John Hick writes, a world without evil "would be the worst of all possible worlds."[1] In fact, any potential for good would then be eradicated. On the most simplistic levels, without hot, cold cannot exist. This is because both hot and cold are comparative substances, and if the state of "cold" never existed then hot in today's definition would not be the same. Another example involves human virtue

and determination. Determination involves defying and overcoming an obstacle, but in a perfect world there is no original obstacle to overcome and thus determination cannot exist. So in a perfect world, basic human virtues that often define our character would never even come up. Even though problems and errors may seem detrimental to our society, they are actually the root of all human values and virtues. Furthermore, by having evil, people can achieve a greater good. In a perfect world, this greater good cannot be attained. Helen Keller once said, "The marvelous richness of human experience would lose something of rewarding joy if there were no limitations to overcome".[2] This comes from a person who was blind and deaf, who was able to overcome these to reach the joy she describes. In fact, philosopher Gottfried Leibniz argued that the world we live in is actually "the best of all possible worlds."[3]

But how does this understanding apply not only to myself, but also to the world? When talking about belief, William James makes an exceptional argument couched in one's creating an epistemological foundation, which directly relates to perfection. James' argument states that in life, one should seek truth and thus risk error. I feel that in life, one can't be scared of error. Indeed, our errors are essential to our existence and define us. Because of this belief, error is a non-issue. Errors may surely slow one's progress towards truth, but once one obtains that truth, errors are forgotten. For example, when a scientist makes a great discovery they don't look back and say, "Wow, I made so many errors, I never should have pursued this topic," but more likely say, "Wow, I made a lot of mistakes but in the end it was all worth it." In the end—and yes this is a somewhat utilitarian point of view—the benefits from truth trump the downfalls of making mistakes.

Another real life example is in Fiji, where the introduction of advertising caused an increase in eating disorders among the inhabitants. Before 1995, Western TV and advertising could not been seen in Fiji culture. But in 1995, magazines like *GQ* and *People* were introduced to the population and, not surprisingly, the women began to diet, which ultimately led to eating disorders. Because the media portrays skinny women and buff men, people in a society begin to think, "This is how I

am supposed to look." But people do not realize that this body form or figure is nearly humanly impossible. It takes years of working out and dieting, and even then the human body has to be pushed to limits that it should never encounter. In our modern society, women face most of this scrutiny to obtain the bodies displayed in magazines. Women feel such a constant pressure from the media that they begin to think that skinny is "perfect." Because of this, they will do anything to achieve this perfection—even if it comes at the risk of their health. So in Fiji where women once were consistently robust and broad shouldered (and healthy), they now try to obtain this Western image of perfection, and as a result under-nutrition exists in about 15% of the women under 21. This sad state of our modern world reveals the dangerous implications of not only perfection, but also the attempt to constantly achieve perfection.

Although it may seem like an attractive idea to remove evil, errors and defects, they define us. Imperfection remains the defining aspect in our society, so by removing or trying to eradicate imperfection, our society would simply fall apart. So instead of fearing imperfection, we as a society should celebrate imperfection. With our flaws, we are able to grow not only as individuals, but also as a society. So next time you get a bad score on a test or get denied by that girl, just think that this setback is simply a reminder that we are all part of this crazy cycle called life. ●

Notes

1. John Hicks, *Between Faith and Doubt*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 131.

2. Margaret Davidson, *Hellen Keller*, (New York: Scholastic, 1989) 12.

3. Gottfriend Leibniz, *The Philosophical Works of Leibniz*, (New Haven: Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor, 1890) 64.