

0.1 Chapter 4: self: Self-Knowledge

0.2 Self-Knowledge

1 On Perfectionism

We should start by admitting that the drive for perfection can be an astonishing, admirable and fruitful human capacity. Perfectionism is at play in a snooker break of 147; Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilyich*; the gold medal Olympic ten meter dive; Bach's *St Matthew Passion*; Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion...

Perfectionism can take a grip anywhere in life, but it is particularly evident in certain areas. The material realm for a start. There can be a yearning for an environment that is entirely neat, clean, harmonious and beautiful. For example: for a kitchen which is spotless; or for a serene and perfectly ordered living room or for an office in which all the plugs and wires are hidden away; the desk is not crowded; and everything has a drawer to go into. Romantic life is similarly marked by deep longings for perfection. There is the aspiration to be wholly understood by someone who combines beauty, wisdom, grace and kindness. We may similarly dream of the perfect family: children who get along well with each other, who are close to their parents and who do their homework enthusiastically. There is intense perfectionism around art as well: we may want to paint a picture which perfectly encapsulates a mood; take a photograph which faithfully expresses one's experience or write a story that completely evokes the sense of a particular place.



We are perfectionists because our imaginations are so adept at conjuring up improved images of life. This is very useful and necessary in many situations. We need to be able to imagine good scenarios so as to gain the energy and focus to try to bring them about. In the early stages of human history, people had to imagine things they didn't have: a ready supply of fresh drinking water; a way of protecting themselves from wild animals at night...

Ideally, the imagination would be limited to prompting ambitions which were within practical reach. But the imagination inherently overshoots. It isn't good at tailoring its suggestions to an accurate assessment of both our personal abilities and how hospitable the outer world might be to our desires. It seems we have been endowed by nature with drives which are beneficial to the species, but may not work to our own particular advantage as individuals. As with salmon leaping up waterfalls to return to their original spawning grounds, we are hardwired with imperatives (to succeed, to win, to master), which have no regard for our personal capacities to deliver on them. Nature doesn't care that we ourselves can't write a particular sonata or launch a cherished business idea; our drives are independent of our talents to deliver on them. Only one salmon in a thousand ends up reproducing successfully...



It's in part the fault of the modern world. Until recently, ambition was for the very few. Then came America. Since 1945, the American Dream has (across the globe) projected all sorts of notions: the idea that everyone can attain material prosperity and have a happy home life, that it is normal for couples to have wry but deeply loyal and contented relationships, that sexual fulfilment is possible over decades with the same person, that neighbours on the whole can be great friends, that children typically have immense respect for their parents (tempered by occasional light teasing); that everyone can be a winner

at the office. The American Dream has vastly increased opportunities for happiness and, of course, at the same time, also expanded the spectre of panic and difficult perfectionism. It has moved a great many areas of human activity from the realm of things that were deemed very likely to go badly wrong to the realm of things that could and should be perfect if only one can follow a few simple and fairly easy rules. It has made hope the norm and internalised the burdens of failure.

The standard line is hence to say that perfectionism is impossible and should be given up on at once. We're typically invited to imagine that the mature, wise life is one that has shed all links to perfectionism. The very term perfectionist is generally used as a criticism: to point out when someone sets unnecessarily, even ridiculously, high standards for themselves and others. It is in the same territory as fussy, pedantic and obsessive.



But perfectionism is not always wrong. And, strikingly, when we encounter things we do consider perfect (like, perhaps, the music of Bach or the villas of Palladio), we don't usually call their creators perfectionists.

So really, we just have to get a little better at handling our perfectionism. For a start, we have to learn how much effort is required to get anything to go well. In a culture like ours, which generally tries to please the consumer, the pains of the producer are kept well out of sight. The chef's nightly anxiety over creating a dish is carefully hidden from the customers. The child does not know the level of effort, self-doubt and worry that the parent contends with; we don't think about the struggles going on in the cockpit, on the factory floor or in the boardroom.



We are always exposed first to the competence of the practiced professional. It is only when we take the path from consumer to producer that we are confronted with how tricky it all really is, and how feeble and inadequate our own resources are likely to be. So we need a saner picture of how much agony lies behind everything we admire and wish to emulate.

Good perfectionism means being able to tolerate the torments of imperfection in oneself and others for long, tumultuous periods. Success means having to forgive oneself the horrors of the first draft.

We need similar degrees of patience when it comes to love. The foiled perfectionist tends to lash out; but no one was ever changed by being called unpleasant things and having a door slammed on them. The intensity of disappointment at certain failures in our partners can be so great, it cuts us off from the poise necessary to educate them into respecting (and then perhaps) living up to one's vision. One ends up shouting when one should have patiently explained. The good solution is not necessarily for the perfectionist to give up on their devotions, just to get better at explaining and sharing them. Perfectionists forget what it is like not to be them: to be unimpressed or indifferent towards topics which feel so spontaneously crucial to them.



The improvement of others which the perfectionist is after requires boundless reserves of kindness, patience and gentleness. That is, it requires a more accurate insight into the difficulties a basically kind and clever person might genuinely face when dealing with an issue (punctuality, keeping the kitchen clean etc.) which comes very easily to one.

Of course, there will be certain areas in which we simply have to surrender our perfectionism.



The trick is to accept that good enough can be good enough. Perfectionists assume that it is only the flawless version of something that is worth having. They feel: if we are late, the evening cant be a success. If the car is scratched, I cant enjoy driving it; if the room is untidy, I cant love my home. To cope, they need to learn how imperfect something can be and yet still retain a great deal of its charm.

Statistics can help too. Because the media concentrates on success stories, the remedy is more accurate information. We need to know the true incidence of arguments in couples, or of failures among businesses or of despair in the hearts of good people.



Humour helps as well. There's a particular vein of humour that gets us to take generous pleasure in the failings of others. *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday* or Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* show us characters who fail profoundly by the standards of the quest for perfection but still end up being rather nice people, worthy of tenderness and sympathy. We don't laugh out of contempt, but because we are charmed. The klutz walks into the door, the nerd fails to get the girl, someone gets fired, the holidays go wrong and yet we are not downcast. Humour allows us to see that we don't need everything to be perfect in order for it to be acceptable.

Finally, we need friends whom we can regularly commune with around failure. We pay a high price for our furtiveness about our own setbacks. We dwell in a glossy world in which being successful seems almost the equivalent to being an acceptable person. We don't want to look foolish and don't want other people to write us off as failures. But failure in most areas is the (secret) norm. We misjudge how common are our tribulations. Admitting imperfection is part of learning how to have a slightly less damaged and slightly less punitive inner life.