

The Misery of Perfectionism

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While striving for survival all higher organisms instinctively search for food and sexual partners; they also defend their living space against hostile intruders. Thus, they achieve a state which can be considered as their perfection.

Man, the highest organism, is the master of his instincts. Possessing a well-developed intelligence, he can compare different things and events. As Adler has shown, he compares himself with others and forms an opinion about his own and other's value. No human has a perfect body, a perfectly satisfactory social position nor total immunity against illness and death; thus, being human is the being aware of inadequacies. This inadequacy results in what Adler called inferiority feelings.

Natural feelings of inferiority may become an inferiority complex for one who has formed too low an opinion of himself and has allowed dominating or pampering persons and painful events to discourage him. An inferiority complex is a hindrance to happiness, usefulness, and behaving pleasantly. An inferiority complex allows one to withdraw to a narrow circle of life where he can avoid failures by not participating, and where he can let others assume the tasks which frighten him. An inferiority complex may also excuse one's manifest failures, at least in one's own eyes, since it is simple to reason as follows: "If I had not had an inferiority complex, I should, of course, have achieved so much more!" But who is responsible for this complex if not each one himself? We are not obligated to give up because difficulties seem to be overwhelming. (Adler, 1935)

Perfectionism, into which the striving to become perfect can turn, may constitute a compulsion neurosis. It has no cause: it is like an idol created by a person who then serves and worships it. Perfectionists may discourage others and alienate them. Perfectionism isolates human beings who would like to relate in a friendly manner.

Man's normal feelings of inferiority can be compensated by courageous and skillful activity, which allows him to feel successful and perfect. A sound feeling of perfection can be obtained by being a good friend, worker, and lover. Such notions as the perfect criminal and the happy lazybone are ideas of a madman. One's natural instinct is to strive for godlikeness, because one does not have "the courage to be imperfect" (Lazarsfeld, 1926). Normally, one will strive to become a little less imperfect every day.

A therapist had a patient whose "nervousness" was due to her ambition always to be perfect. He suggested that she write on a paper: "In order to be a perfect human being, I must have the courage to be less than perfect." This statement was always to be kept in front of the patient's eyes. What happened? She wrote down these words, but not finding the handwriting perfect enough she repeated the job three times until she deemed her achievement perfect.

An artist, who complained about his difficulties of getting on socially, was a perfectionist in the field of vision. He always had to criticize the imperfections of color or form which struck him in houses to which he had been invited. After a few enlightening talks he told me: "I found myself in the luxurious home of a new acquaintance and I was still inconsiderate enough to say to my host that in so elegant a dining room there should not hang reproductions of famous works, but original paintings. For the first time in my life I noticed that my words caused a host's face to register a dissatisfied expression. Having learned much about my complex I managed not to add that a little table lamp was also not in keeping with the rest of the room's furniture; nevertheless, on the point of leaving I could not refrain from remarking that the baroque lamp contrasted disagreeably with the modern style of the whole room." This man, having begun to understand that impeccable beauty had become for him an idol which others did not worship, still had to retrain himself to give up shocking others with his perfectionism and to become more sociable. One cannot get rid of an obsessional perfectionism overnight even if one has clearly recognized it as a mistake.

If someone is said to speak a foreign language perfectly, nobody expects him never to make a mistake. Do we not sometimes commit errors in our mother tongue? We shall, of course, try to increase our vocabulary and to refine our expressions. But the perfectionist is not able to allow himself any mistake and does not dare to open his mouth to speak in a foreign country. He thus loses the chance to be corrected and to advance, by trial, error, and success, towards a greater perfection. While eager to criticize others, a perfectionist cannot himself stand criticism.

A perfectionist often excludes from his life the striving for certain achievements which, to be perfect, would need more time, patient study, and practice than he is ready to give. By thinking: "If I cannot be a perfect sportsman, speaker, singer, card player, etc., I shall not try at all," the perfectionist often misses much fun in life.

I had a perfectionist acquaintance who had never willingly acknowledged one of my fairly creditable achievements. Once I asked him if his goal was one of perfection or of putting up just a good performance? "Both!" he replied, neither understanding nor even being aware of his obsession. In certain circumstances the perfectionist shows lack of common sense and uses a "private logic" which can be understood only by understanding his need for rationalization. (Adler, 1935)

Walking once with him on a main street, I had to listen to a stream of sneering remarks: How terrible that long haired fellow! How short that mini-skirt! How ridiculous this African in his native dress! How old-fashioned that bearded Jew in his caftan! How rude that driver who tried to get ahead of another car! How ugly this building which since long should have been replaced by a new one! — I was not less observant of these facts but I just smiled or found them stimulating. No pleasant conversation can arise with a fault-finding perfectionist.

A person's compulsion to be absolutely perfect in everything he touches puts him under continuous stress. He wastes much time and strength in trying to outshine all others. The perfectionist is usually a nervous person. He is nervous because he is self-conscious.

In an informal discussion, one member always waited until all others had spoken. Then he would proceed to show up the imperfections of the points or arguments of the other group members, and the perfect answer to the problems himself. Soon some members withdrew from the group because they were unable to stand his vanity which is another name for superiority complex. Perfectionists do not easily win friends.

If one tried to point out to someone the nonsense of his perfectionist behavior he would probably react by proving against all common sense how correct he was. One cannot change the perfectionist with humorous remarks and must simply tolerate or avoid him. Behind the facade of his superiority, the perfectionist probably feels miserable for he has no sense of humor.

The perfectionist is, of course, an abstraction of a general type. In reality, each individual is unique. The perfectionist's striving for personal superiority over others can have many different meanings. His hidden purpose may be to waste time, to keep others waiting, to depreciate another person by making him appear, by contrast, so much inferior, or to have an excuse for failures in particular fields of life. Also the hidden meaning of such a person could be to gain admiration as a super-perfect worker or business man though he has failed at something such as being a husband and father.

In the case of treatment, the origin and development of the patient's complex must be made clear to him as his own error and desire for achievement. At the beginning, this obsession may have appeared useful, but later the need for perfection became a brutal taskmaster. With deepened and widened insight, encouragement, and training for a more flexible life style, the perfectionist may slowly cease to suffer from his misery and become an autonomous person, who is sensitive, spontaneous, cooperative, and full of humor. This new goal of just being a *useful fellow* will allow him to live more happily, even though being less perfect than God.

References

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