

Perfection or Imperfection: Which Will It Be?
Rev. Dave Hunter
Unitarian Universalists of Gettysburg
May 7, 2017

Perfection or imperfection, which will it be? Let's start at the beginning: Genesis, chapter one. God does six days of creating. And from time to time God sees that what he has created is good.¹ And when the six-day project is complete, God sees that the whole thing is *very* good.²

But nothing created during that first week is characterized as perfect;³ isn't that a little odd? Of course, no one says it's not perfect, and no imperfections are noted. Still, couldn't we expect God to meet the highest possible standard, the standard of perfection?

Perfection, of course, is an elusive standard. But if God cannot produce work that is recognized as perfect, who can?

But many of you, I'm sure, would rather discuss baseball than fanciful theological speculations. A perfect game in baseball, from the pitcher's perspective, as I'm sure you all know, is a game in which the 27 batters for the other side all make outs, and none of them reaches first base – no hits, no runs, no base runners. But is that really perfect? It seems to me that for the pitcher's performance to be perfect, all 27 batters should strike out. Better yet, they should all strike out on 3 pitches – and with not even a single fowl ball. And the pitcher should win the game with a home run, in the ninth inning. And, for good measure, let's make it the World Series, game 7. That's perfection for you. It's a high standard – an unreasonably, impossibly high standard.

¹ *towb* – good (as an adjective) in the widest sense; used likewise as a noun, both in the masculine and the feminine, the singular and the plural (good, a good or good thing, a good man or woman; the good, goods or good things, good men or women), also as an adverb (well):--beautiful, best, better, bountiful, cheerful, at ease, X fair (word), (be in) favour, fine, glad, good (deed, -lier, -liet, -ly, -ness, -s), graciously, joyful, kindly, kindness, liketh (best), loving, merry, X most, pleasant, + pleaseth, pleasure, precious, prosperity, ready, sweet, wealth, welfare, (be) well ((-favoured)).

² It's seems a little odd that the judgment that the day's work of creation is good was omitted on the second day, when the sky was created. And on the sixth day, the creation of animals and of things that creep on the ground was pronounced good, although no such judgment was expressed later on the sixth day with respect to humanity, although we're included in the conclusion that the whole project is very good.

³ *tamiym* – entire (literally, figuratively or morally); also (as noun) integrity, truth:--without blemish, complete, full, perfect, sincerely (-ity), sound, without spot, undefiled, upright(-ly), whole.

Let's go back to God, and some more probably pointless pseudo-theological speculation. Can we stipulate that God is perfect? I'm setting aside the question of whether God exists or not. How could God be anything less than perfect? So why isn't what God created perfect, too? If God were unable to create perfection we could hardly consider him perfect, could we? Alternatively, why wasn't God content without doing the six-day thing? He's already perfect, what more could he want? Don't tell me he was bored – if you're perfect you don't get bored. Perhaps God in fact did not create all the stuff described in Genesis. Perhaps we're not actually here, or we're just products of God's imagination, and all that really exists is God, God alone.

Actually, if what you want is perfection, is there anything more perfect than complete nothingness? No space, no time, no protons, electrons, or neutrons – or any of those other little particles that we can't see or imagine, no numbers, no propositions of logic or geometry, and, of course, no God. No opportunity for imperfection.

The hymn we'll sing later, "Bring Many Names," gives us very different images of God,⁴ images perhaps more consistent with the alternative beginning we find in Genesis, the one involving Adam and Eve. They're not perfect either. In fact they were disobedient. They ate the fruit that God had told them not to eat. They were expelled from the Garden of Eden, and, as a result, look at the mess that humanity is in now. It all started with their disobeying God's order.

Or – here's another way to look at it – it all started with their liberating themselves and their descendants from their prison, known as the Garden of Eden. They claimed their free will. They took responsibility for their lives. They recognized that what lay ahead of them might not be as perfect as Eden, but that their liberation would allow them and their descendants to flourish. They – or we – might make mistakes, but we want to be in charge of our own lives. We want our freedom; we want to explore, to investigate, to create. So here we are. God is no longer looking after us. We're on our own. How do you feel about that?

But let's go back to God's creation and explore briefly whether we might be able to call it not only good but perfect.

Consider the Circle of Fifths. Some of you will know what I'm talking about, and others won't have a clue. Briefly, if we start with some note on the piano – let's say C – and go up five notes, that would be to G, we call that a fifth. And up a fifth from G is D. If we keep going up like this, before you know it we're at C again, though several octaves higher. The circle is complete. You might call the Circle of Fifths the foundation of music, at least of western music. Indeed, I might call it evidence of the perfection of God's creation.

⁴ *Singing the Living Tradition* #23, words by Brian Wren.

Except, except it doesn't quite work. You don't quite come back to where you started. There's a fudge factor that gives the circle the appearance of perfection. Why didn't God just do it right?

As we all know, and the authors of Genesis presumably did not, the earth goes around the sun, and the moon goes around the earth. It takes the earth a little more than 365 days to go all the way around the earth – we call that a year, a solar year. It takes the moon about 29 and 1/2 days to go through all of its phases – we call that a lunar month. Now if God had been more careful in doing his creating, the number of lunar months in a solar year would have been an integer, twelve most likely, but it turns out to be about twelve and a third. That's why Ramadan never has the same dates two years in a row and slowly moves around the calendar. That's why we never know when Easter will be this year without looking it up. God could have done better than that, don't you think?

We might expect the physical world to be a little messy, but what about the world of logic and mathematics. We expect that to be tidy and orderly. We expect ironclad proofs. Sadly, it's not that simple. There are apparently true propositions in mathematics that cannot be proven true. This was Kurt Gödel's conclusion in a paper published in 1931. Don't ask me to try to explain this,⁵ but it would appear to show that this important portion of God's creation lacks perfection.

Let's return to the physical world, and to Ockham's Razor. As you may remember from an undergraduate philosophy course, the medieval philosopher William of Ockham proposed the principle that simpler theories that are compatible with our observations are to be preferred over more complex ones. Thus, to use the most frequent example, we accept the heliocentric model for our solar system rather than the geocentric model. Until recently it had never occurred to me to question the wisdom of Ockham's Razor, but why couldn't the more complicated theory occasionally be the correct one? One argument for Ockham is that a perfect creator – that's God – would not unnecessarily complicate his work, to which one could respond: Maybe there's a competing value that we haven't discovered that justifies the complexity, or maybe the creator isn't perfect after all.⁶

My first and, so far, only physics course was in high school. It was quite up to date for its time, but there has been some progress in the last 57 years. A bedrock scientific principle, back when I studied physics, was charge-parity invariance. If you're not familiar with that, it's the principle that the same laws of physics would apply if the charges of particles were reversed from positive to negative or vice versa, that is, if matter became anti-matter, and vice versa. But that

⁵ See Ernest Nagel & James R. Newman, *Gödel's Proof* (1958).

⁶ See Tom Graham, review of Elliott Sober, *Ockham's Razors: A User's Manual* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), Times Literary Supplement, May 13, 2016, p. 30.

raises the question, why, in the big bang, didn't matter and anti-matter annihilate each other? It turns out, experiments in 1964 revealed, that particles of matter and of anti-matter obey slightly different laws of physics. This fundamental asymmetry is called the Fitch-Cronin effect. The Fitch-Cronin effect is considered an imperfection in the laws of physics, but without it we, and our world, would not exist.⁷

One mistake I made in high school – one of many – was to pass up the course in biology. I spent that period playing the violin instead. So I missed out on learning about DNA. DNA is that wonderful substance that transmits instructions for living creatures from one generation to the next. DNA is extremely good at what it does; it's almost 100% accurate. But it does make the occasional mistake, and then its mistakes can be passed on to following generations. You'd think that God, the perfect creator, could do better than that. As it turns out, however, these mistakes can be useful. You've heard of evolution, haven't you? The mistakes are the vehicle of evolution. The capacity to blunder slightly is the real marvel of DNA. Without this special attribute, this imperfection, we would still be anaerobic bacteria.⁸

But let's turn our attention to our world, to our every day, practical world. Let's take a minute or two to look at marriage.

Marriage is an imperfect, fallible institution, and those participating in it are themselves imperfect and fallible. That's the nature of humanity, and of the people I know, including myself. We may have the ideal of marriages that last 'til death do us part, but we know that, despite our best efforts, it doesn't always work out that way. And in a perfect world, marriages would not be terminated by *death* until both partners had reached a ripe old age.

If you're single, there's no one ideal spouse just waiting for you, if the two of you can ever find each other. We must work to find a possibly right person, work hard with that person to become a couple that can make a good marriage. And then, after the wedding, that couple must continue to work to make the marriage successful and lasting. It's not easy. We can never say that we've finished the hard work. We can never say that it's up to the other person.⁹

Since we cannot expect to find that one perfect soul mate, it follows that there are others out there whom we would find just as attractive and desirable as the one we have now.

⁷ See obituary of James Cronin, New York Times, Aug. 31, 2016, p. B14.

⁸ See Lewis Thomas, "The Wonderful Mistake."

⁹ Love between the couple starts out lower in the arranged marriage than in what we think of as the standard marriage. But give it time. Five years out, and the love in arranged marriages exceeds that in nonarranged marriages. Arranged marriages succeed because those participating in them realize that there's work to be done. It's just as true, but perhaps less obvious, in nonarranged marriages. WHYY, Radio Times, Aug. 1, 2015, Robert Epstein.

Psychologist Barry Schwartz advises us, make your decisions nonreversible. Don't try to make the perfect choice, but be content with a choice that is good enough. Trying to make the best possible choice is very time consuming, and you probably won't succeed anyway. Worse yet, you'll be afflicted with buyer's regret – you'll be sure that some other not yet discovered choice would be better. Avoid all of this, Schwartz says. Make a choice that's good enough, and then don't look back.¹⁰

And while we're considering the choices that we humans make, let me remind you that a week from Tuesday is primary election day here in Pennsylvania. I'm pretty sure that none of the candidates are perfect. But I'm equally confident that staying home is not the right choice, nor is closing your eyes and choosing randomly. Do your homework, then vote.

Also, next month we elect the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association. There are three candidates on the ballot. Again, none is perfect. But do your homework, and make sure your congregational voice is heard.

Before I finish, a quick stop back with the Bible. Matthew was the only one of the four gospel writers to use the word "perfect." In the Sermon on the Mount, his Jesus says, "Be perfect,¹¹ therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."¹² Later Jesus explains, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."¹³

I'll leave that for your future contemplation and discussion, likewise this:

Here's the scene: breakfast at Perkins, in Gettysburg, a few weeks ago. The waitress asks, "what will you have?" I respond: "two eggs over easy, please, with sausage patties, an English muffin, and fruit instead of potatoes." She responds, "Perfect." What would she have said if I had ordered rye toast rather than an English muffin?

¹⁰ "Knowing that you've made a choice that you will not reverse allows you to pour your energy into improving the relationship that you have, rather than constantly second-guessing it." Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less* (2004), p. 229. See also Alain de Botton, "Why You Will Marry the Wrong Person," *New York Times*, Sunday Review, May 28, 2016,

¹¹ *teleios* – complete (in various applications of labor, growth, mental and moral character, etc.).

¹² Matthew 5:48.

¹³ Matthew 19:21.