

Embracing Ourselves: Defeating the Tyranny of Imperfection

Unsuccessful, less than, disappointing, loser, ugly, deficient. Those are a few of the images we associate with the word imperfection. When we think of imperfection, it evokes a sense of inadequacy or failure. We treat imperfection as if it were fact, and find ourselves dreading the concept even while judging ourselves and others on the basis of it. The struggle with imperfection has led to personal, health and social crises which are hurting our humanity, especially our youth. We are told to “accept” imperfection but is the concept even real? Perfection is largely a subjective standard that often reflects a particular social and political power structure. Imperfection is then a derivative of an opinion and not a statement of fact. This is why we should not think in terms of imperfections but focus instead on accepting ourselves and others as we are without attaching a value judgment. We can then be free to work on the best version of ourselves and on developing our full potential without arbitrary standards that hold us back and impact our social and mental health.

If asked, most would likely define imperfect as something that is not perfect. The concept of imperfect is not defined on its own terms but rather in reference to something else. To know what is imperfect, you would need to know what is perfect. If a student scores an 87 out of 100 on a test, even if that is a good grade for that class, the student may feel sad and imperfect because a score of 100 has been defined as perfection. Even though the 87 might be a solid grade, the student may feel like a complete failure because the perfect score was not achieved. If we want to tackle the tyranny of imperfection, we need to understand the concept of perfection.

Perfection is not a natural law but a social construct, shaped by centuries of cultural and political forces. In ancient times, perfection reflected the idea of completion. To be perfect was

to achieve fullness and lack nothing. The word is often used to describe what is ideal or desirable: a perfect child, a perfect student, a perfect body, a perfect world. The concept of perfect gathers meaning with respect to that which it describes. But if you were to ask ten individuals what is a perfect house, you come up with different definitions. One may define perfection by the size of the house, while another may define it by its structure or location. There may be some common factors in the definition, but the point is that what is perfect is a subjective assessment. There is no objectively perfect house, and the same is true in other contexts. Yet, in today's world, what is perfect is often treated as fact and used to determine others' value and our own self-worth in a way that is detrimental to our well-being.

In an ideal world, we should all be treated as equal. No look or way of life should be deemed perfect as there are many possible lifestyles and human features, and what may be best for one person may not be right for someone else. In practice, however, certain characteristics are deemed perfect, and anything short of that can be seen as imperfect or defective. The subjective ideal of imperfection is factualized and treated as an objective value. For example, in Ancient Sparta, the ideal newborn son was a strong baby, and if a boy was born with what the father perceived as a malformation, he could discard the child at will. In Ancient Rome, fair skin was considered beautiful because it was seen as reflective of privilege. Those with lighter skin were perceived as wealthier since they did not have to work outdoors and their skin was not darkened by the sun. Pale skin was favored in Victorian England and some would even apply cosmetics to pursue that ideal. Societal standards of perfection had an undeserved and destructive force that led to rejection and disparagement of those who fell short. Those who did not conform were marginalized, particularly people of color like myself, whose natural features were systematically devalued. Someone who looked like me would likely have been seen as imperfect,

even undesirable, in Ancient Greece and Rome, and my fate might have been social exclusion and rejection.

Imperfection thus became throughout history a tool for marginalization, discrimination, divisiveness and social upheaval. The concept of imperfection was used to justify excluding ideas and people that did not meet the perfect standard. And who was setting the standard? Those in positions of privilege and power who, by setting a standard that reflected them and their goals, could exercise social control. If someone or something did not meet that standard, they could be rejected and excluded. This phenomenon can be observed even in simple interaction among children. A child who does not have the hairstyle and clothes considered fashionable by the popular group will be deemed uncool and can be excluded from the lunch table for failing to meet a standard. The popular group maintains its exclusive, elite status by excluding peers who do not meet their arbitrary rules. The child with the allegedly unfashionable outfit internalizes a sense of imperfection, of not belonging.

While the impact of excluding a child from the popular kids' table may seem small in the context of the greater world, the dynamic of exclusion exemplified in this example replicates itself on a larger social scale, leading to disastrous outcomes. History shows that perceived or alleged imperfections, no more than deviations from an arbitrary subjective standard, have been used to enslave people, marginalize populations, and justify genocide. Race has often been a component of oppressive ideas of perfection, including in Western societies, where Eurocentric features have been upheld as the beauty standard for centuries. Thus, the use of alleged imperfections can become a weapon used to justify actions that favor those who meet the standard while bringing disadvantage to those who do not.

The weaponization of imperfection contributes to its internalization by those targeted resulting in a sense of inadequacy and lack of self-esteem. If some are celebrated for meeting a particular standard while others are excluded, those who are marginalized will eventually conclude that they are imperfect. The pursuit of perfection traps people in an endless cycle of self-criticism and insecurity. Maybe students' grades do not meet a certain standard, or their body shape is not like that of the influencers on Instagram. While the circumstances may be different, the feeling of inadequacy will be the same. At that point, we do not need anyone else to remind us of our alleged shortcomings because we ourselves have bought into the message that we are imperfect. We are told to accept imperfections, but by saying we are imperfect, we are simply validating some artificial standard that we are somehow “less than”, that we are inferior. Why do we have to conform to a standard imposed on us by society, not our own? Why do we have to think in terms of being less than the ideal, as opposed to accepting ourselves the way we are? Why are we valued not as we are but in reference to an ideal set by others?

The pressure to be “perfect” has been catastrophic. The rise of social media has made the problem of self-image and the struggle with imperfection exponentially worse. The constant bombardment of images of the perfect face, the perfect student, the perfect life, the perfect job, and the perfect home reminds viewers that their life is imperfect. When we strive for an unattainable ideal, we inevitably fall short, and this perceived failure fosters feelings of inadequacy. This dissatisfaction creates a fertile ground for industries that profit from our insecurities. Beauty products, fitness regimes, plastic surgery, and self-help books all promise to bring us closer to an ideal that will forever be out of reach. This industry of dissatisfaction thrives on our insecurities, compelling us to focus on what we lack rather than what we have or need. Feeling imperfect can lead to a self-hatred that has contributed to an epidemic of mental

health crisis. This is why we must not accept the concept of imperfection and we must break away from the tyranny of perfection.

If we stop striving to accept imperfection and instead question the validity of perfection itself, we might find that neither concept is useful or even relevant. To break free from the tyranny of imperfection, we must challenge the concept of perfection itself. We must stop measuring ourselves against arbitrary standards and focus on being, not perfect, but rather the best version of ourselves. When we reject perfection, the concept of imperfection loses its power. We can then shift away from viewing ourselves as flawed and instead see ourselves as unique and valuable individuals, constantly evolving and inherently worthy of respect. When the ideal of perfection is rejected, the tyranny of imperfection crumbles. We will no longer have the vocabulary to think about what is lacking in ourselves or others, and instead we will think of the possibilities of what we can be on our terms and in our own time.

Let's build a new model over the ashes of imperfection. Perfection is a false idol. When we reject it, we can free ourselves to pursue our own path and to value others based on who and how they are and not on how they conform to an idea of how they should be. Replace the concept of accepting imperfection with the goal of accepting ourselves and others for who we are. Self-improvement should still be a goal, but it would be pursued authentically, without the constraints of a foreign model. This shift in perspective would foster mental well-being, reduce exclusion, and promote mutual respect. We can see ourselves and others as a work in progress focusing on self-realization and growth without the judgment that comes from measuring ourselves and each other against some ideal that, frankly, may not be so ideal after all. A world in which we learn to accept ourselves and others will make ideas of perfection or accepting imperfections irrelevant, decreasing the social ills that accompany the obsession of feeling like a

failure. Further, by rejecting the notion of perfection, we can also dismantle the systems that rely on it to implement division and oppression.

Imagine a world in which we do not have a reference to perfection. Suddenly, we do not have a tool to reject others for being imperfect. The table in the school cafeteria will not be populated on the basis of meeting certain looks, but instead will reflect a rainbow of different people sharing experiences in a sea of diversity. A student will not think in terms of being a failure because of a so-called bad grade, which can be shaming and demoralizing, and instead can focus on working with the teachers towards goals for improvement. In this model, we can see a shift from negative thinking focused on “what I am not” to a positive attitude built on “what I can be.” This is a world I would want to live in and which, as part a young generation, I aspire to build.

In summary, the concept of imperfection is not a natural state but a byproduct of a society obsessed with perfection. If we eliminate the idea of perfection, imperfection loses its meaning. Instead of viewing ourselves as deficient, we can celebrate our strengths and embrace our unique paths, free from the oppressive weight of judgment. This approach enables us to accept others as they are, without measuring them against an arbitrary standard. Together, we can forge a new world based on mutual respect, understanding, and the recognition of our shared humanity. By breaking the cycle of judgment, we create the conditions for a more inclusive, compassionate society where everyone can thrive.