

(im)perfect

Here's a question for perfectionists everywhere: how's that working out for you? Michael Holden explores the pleasures and perils of aspiring to perfection, and speaks to Oliver Burkeman, the journalist who writes about living meaningfully under the banner of The Imperfectionist

There are few more subjective notions than perfection. A definitive interpretation of this inscrutable, mutable thing can only be a fool's errand, or, at best, a quantum riddle. Whatever your definition, somewhere in perfection's shadow squats its cousin and its context: decay. Though for the truly broadminded these might be one and the same thing.

If you're curious, look closely in the mirror, or move into an old building. I know better than to loiter near my reflection these days, but I can't escape the mortality of my apartment.

'There are no right angles!'

A roofer is telling me this as he loads up his van having repaired one part of our building but in so doing created a substantial crack in another. This is not his fault, he says, it is just the way of things.

'All old places are falling down.'

Whether he knows it or not, our roofer is from a tradition of tradesmen, architects and truth seekers who have been obsessed by and tasked with delivering the dimensions of perfection. Freemasonry has its roots in the 14th century but its symbolism draws further back to the craftsmen of the ancient world, the first temple at Jerusalem and beyond. Ancient Egyptian builders held the triangle to be the perfect form, the masons favour the square. These notions feed forward into alchemy, the medieval quest for a perfect material which might transform matter deemed inadequate into something very desirable – gold, itself an allegory for the idea of a perfect being or soul. We may have eased up on the pyramid-building, more or less, but the dream of self-perfection haunts our inner landscape still. Though not,

it seems, our roofer, who exits laughing in his van with the radio on. Wise fellow.

It is a law of adolescent causality that more or less the first time you hear Lou Reed's apparent love song 'Perfect Day,' someone will appear and tell you that "in fact" it is 'about heroin'. If you are particularly unfortunate, they may even offer you some. What is less discussed is that heroin is about love, and addiction a form of futile alchemy through which we try to make ourselves feel perfect in ways that we can never be. Judge not the junkie, for we are all in some way prey to this. Be under no illusion, when the call to restart the world's economies comes it will echo with the rhetoric of self-improvement. Do your bit by clearing your inbox, then do your taxes and get your nails done.

It is easier to avoid or even abandon hard drugs than it is to sidestep the wider mania for wishing we were better than we are. My inbox and by extension myself enjoy some respite from this impossible culture via a newsletter called 'The Imperfectionist'. This is the twice-monthly mission statement of the British writer Oliver Burkeman who, like Lou Reed before him, calls out to our better nature from the (once) congested canyons of New York.

'What I mean by imperfection,' says Burkeman, 'is to do with our having standards and aims in life that are literally impossible to bring into reality. It's to do with the way that we tyrannise ourselves to try to achieve things that would not just be difficult – because achieving excellence in lots of fields is always going to be difficult – but which are logically, intrinsically, structurally impossible. Your brain can come up with a

limitless number of ambitions, but your time and energy on the planet are fixed. I guess "imperfectionism" is to do with confronting and acknowledging those built-in limitations of time, talent, accident of birth, whatever. Not because I think that we should all be going around in gloomy despair; it's not about giving up and lowering your standards. Through acknowledging the truth of my situation I can actually put my time and talents to best use. And it's through denying them and scrambling to get to some position of perfection that I'll never reach that I never do get round to the things that matter most, or alienating people, or focusing my time on the wrong things.'

Perfection was always a dream. Nothing wrong with that, but the danger of dreams, as any analyst will tell you, comes when we try and force the symbolic into cold reality. This is part of the malaise behind our present pathology: we have internalised a myth which is making us worse the closer we get to thinking we can manifest it.

'Technology allows us to do things much, much faster than we could previously,' Burkeman continues, 'so it's more and more of an affront and an insult that we can't achieve escape velocity and do things completely instantaneously. You can be on the internet and get any information that you want in a second – it's even worse that there are three cars ahead of you and you can't just zoom down the street as fast as you'd like. It's this idea that we are almost gods, it's incredibly enraging and an insult to our sort of narcissism that we are not quite there. I really like that basic idea in ancient philosophy that your job is not to become a god, your job is to try

to be the most wholehearted human that you can and express that status as fully as you can. Maybe that's what I'm getting at with imperfectionism.'

There might be few things more imperfect than killing one another. I once heard a convicted murderer who'd served 15 years in prison and was now consulting on gangster movies field a question for a film director who knew their picture was kind of a dud. As the director slumped in his chair, the old villain reflected that nothing is perfect, and told the press conference about the Navajo Indian habit of deliberate imperfection. 'They leave an imperfection in every blanket they weave,' said this old man from Bethnal Green. He looked more at peace than anyone in the film business that evening. I knew he must be onto something.

Perfection then might be our original cognitive sin: how we threw ourselves out of the garden. If something could be perfect (and we the arbiter of such) then what follows from that? And now we find ourselves bereft, clutching at machines that gives us more time than ever to consider that emptiness. Yet, as Oliver Burkeman is quick to point out, none of this is necessarily our fault. 'I think that's an excellent mythological way of summing it up. But I think there's a danger in what I said, and maybe what you said too, of inadvertently individualising all this and making it seem like we are each of us megalomaniacs when it comes to perfection, and overlooking that one of the levels on which this all happens is societal and macroeconomic. It's not necessarily that I think I can answer a thousand emails in the space of a day, but that I feel pressure that I ought to be able to and that I fear for my financial

security if I can't. So it's the same point, but there's a pressure to be perfect and reach these absolute standards whether or not you personally or consciously want it. That then brings up all sorts of other areas like body image, a perfect ideal of what you're supposed to look like et cetera.'

Seeing as we can't un-conceive of perfection (since that might be an impossible attempt at perfection in itself), how then can we learn to live with it? 'If I was generating contrary arguments,' says Burkeman, 'I would think about maths in the sense that there's an idea about destinations that are constantly approached and never reached – asymptotes. But never mind about the jargon, there's an argument that says, in certain ways, having the perfect vision of something is helpful and useful and a spur to creativity. There's nothing wrong with me holding a vision of things to use as a navigational tool, as long as I understand that that's what it is. I'm not ever going to write the perfect sentence, but it's not necessarily a bad thing to have that aspiration on some level.'

Perfection without purgatory becomes a matter of dosage. A therapeutic measure of an ideal. The problem comes when it turns to doctrine or dogma. This, I would assert, is part of the reason people love *Bake Off*. No harm in perfecting your pavlova. You bake, you eat, you move on.

In this sense, says Burkeman, bakery is close to Buddhism. 'In Zen there's a lot of talk of "the great perfection", and what this seems to mean in the most general sense is the idea of the whole of reality exactly as it is, stripped of any artificially imposed yardsticks according to which you might find it wanting – so another way of saying perfection is impossible to achieve is saying that perfection is already ubiquitous in everything. There's some sense, even though I don't pretend that I feel it on a day-to-day basis, in which

everything is exactly as it is and couldn't be otherwise. With that you can aspire to an appreciation for perfection which is really an appreciation for the whole mess of reality as it is.'

Learning to love the mess is increasingly out of style. Our manic reassessment of creativity to see who we might be 'right' to admire seems predicated on denial. What could 'perfect' art from 'perfect' artists possibly consist of, or really have to say? One gets the sense of human nature itself being purged as opposed to accepted and incorporated into a psychological maturity that can see things as good and bad at the same time. Accepting, as opposed to reviling and denying, the mess would require us to sign off as its editor – and this we are loath to do, unless we are willing to reinstate divinity, and step back from our self-anointed Saturnalia. 'I suspect Zen Buddhists wouldn't be pleased with your phrasing, but that's the basic idea, that it's on you to see the mesh that you were putting on reality that led to your conclusion that things were a problem and need to change – and in the most absolute sense those are additions to the picture. You quickly get mired in all sorts of obvious responses – "Are you saying it's OK that...?" – then list the many sufferings of the world. The point is not that those things are OK, but that at some level your judgement that they are not OK is something that you choose to bring to the picture, and it's quite right to bring that to the picture when for instance it's suffering children. But you could choose to not bring that judgement to the picture when it's the fact that the short story you are writing is not as good as Ernest Hemingway's. You can loosen that up and still be judgemental when it seems useful to be judgemental.'

There's a quote from the writer Byron Katie: 'When I argue with reality, I lose – but only 100 per cent of the time.' Says Burkeman: 'On a self-help level obviously there are cases of people killing themselves in cases

of perfectionism in its absolute worst pathology. More generally, for the rest of us it has the effect of postponing the moment of fulfilment in life to some future point at which perfection is achieved. It sets up your whole life as not quite the real thing until you get there – and thus postpones fulfilment, whereas an embrace of what I'm calling imperfectionism allows you to find the value and the meaning in the present moment. I'm aware that as I talk about this it comes from my own experience and there may be people with a quite different set of psychological screw-ups who would benefit from more perfectionism; I don't know.' And here's the rub perhaps: we're all different. All accidents. Joyously so. And we'd be in real trouble if we were all the same. Evolution is driven by mutation. The philosopher and scientist Telmo Pievani writes of DNA having 'a crucial ambivalence... It is stable, otherwise there wouldn't be any transmission of genetic evolution, and at the same time it is variable, otherwise there wouldn't be any evolution. The error in evolution is that it is generative, it is the lifeblood of change.'

Having hauled our mutant selves out the seas and then crossed them to kill each other, what might our next move be as we attempt to defuse the bomb of our alleged progress as gently as possible? It seems as well to ask someone in New York City, how might a post-virus Madison Avenue tempt us to a better tomorrow? 'I don't know that I can come up with any urban policy changes – safer streets to favour pedestrians and cyclists and so on. You can certainly put American car culture through a perfectionism interpretation, you can drive around precisely climate-controlled, choice of music, choice of company. American general hostility to public transport, an individualist perfectionism...' Building a bubble that bursts the world. 'Exactly. In the meantime I get a kind of best-of-both-worlds benefit. I find New York tremendously energising

and I find the future focus that I associate with New York constantly working to do bigger things, cooler things, whatever – I do find that energising and I contrast it, probably unfairly, with a kind of backward-looking resignation that I've often found in the British mindset. But on the other hand, because I am British I get to hold it at a safe remove. I'm indulged a little if I show up at some event and I am slightly shabbier than you officially should be, because I am British. Every time I go for a dental check-up they try and sell me on something that would eliminate the gap between my two front teeth and it's just "no". It's just who I am. I don't have bad teeth

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in the way that Americans think British people have bad teeth, but I certainly don't have perfect American teeth and I'm fine with that.'

The moral here is more than mind the gap, then. We must accept and defend it. Or get in our vans and drive merrily away.

Oliver Burkeman's next book, *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals*, will be published in July by FSG in the US and The Bodley Head in the UK. You can sign up for 'The Imperfectionist' newsletter at www.oliverburkeman.com