

# Perfectionism: An Ethical Theory of the Soul

Vikas Kumar

UGC NET-JRF, Research Scholar, Dept. of Philosophy, Patna University, Patna

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### Corresponding Author

Email: [manishvikas94\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:manishvikas94[at]gmail.com)

## ABSTRACT

Perfectionism is the continuative process of will in obtaining the optimal or best quality of mental spiritual physical and material being. The perfectionist does not necessarily believe that one can achieve perfect life; rather, it is persistent process in obtaining the best possible life or state of living. Perfectionism, in ethics and value theory, has a long history and has been addressed by several eminent philosophers. Aristotle stated his notion of good life as eudaemonia. The philosopher Stanley Cavell develops the concept of moral perfectionism as the idea to reach an unattained self to the attainable self that one ought to reach. According to Immanuel Kant, perfectionism is a universal moral law (categorical imperative) by which we can rationally determine whether an action is right or wrong. According to John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism view, the good action is that which cause least harm or the greatest good for greatest number. Perfectionism has acquired several meaning in contemporary moral and political philosophy. This term used to refer to an account of good human life, an account of human well being, a moral theory and an approach to politics. Aristotle, Karl Marx, Aquinas, Spinoza, T.H.Green are perfectionist according to their approach. The foundation philosophies of India such as Buddhism, Jainism and Advaita Vedanta have also promoted different kinds of perfectionism.

## 1. Introduction

The theory which deals with the perfection of the self is called 'Perfectionism'. 'Perfectionism' or 'self-perfectionism' is the theory which propounds that, the ultimate aim is self-improvement or self-development. Perfection or self-realization is the highest good for perfectionism. Perfection of self is the perfection of feelings, emotions and desires in accordance with the virtue or moral excellence. It implies conscious pursuit of this ideal by every person in human society. The idea of an all-round development of capacities is attractive and round a great supporter, 'Bradley'. According to him, "A man's aim should be to widen in every way, both, in the world of knowledge and in the realm of practice".

The theory of 'perfectionism' is a compromise between 'Hedonism' and 'Rationalism'. According to 'Hedonism', Reason is the slave of passion, while, according to 'Rationalism', an ideal life is purely a rational life. But, self-perfectionism treats both, 'Reason' and 'passion', as the essential components of the self. It is also called 'Eudaemonism', the word being derived from 'Eudemonia' means happiness or welfare; however, "human flourishing or prosperity" and "blessedness" have been proposed as more accurate translations. Aristotle, defined, 'Eudemonia' as, the exercise of a man's soul in accordance with 'excellence' and if, there be more than one excellence, in accordance with, the best and most complete excellence. Thus, perfectionism believes total welfare to the ultimate aim. It is the welfare of the complete personality of the integral self.

## 2. Perfectionism- As The Doctrine of Ethics of Personality

This doctrine is also called 'The ethics of personality' or 'the ethics of self-realization'. It consists in the full development in personality. The realization of human personality means, it's realization in the society. Self-realization is possible only

through self-sacrifice. Love is manifested in living the life of others, or, giving oneself up to the others. Universal love and social service lead to the self-realization. Human beings are born with particular aptitudes in a particular social environment and his specific duties depend upon them. They should sustain in their own way and further, the moral world of which they are members.

Their specific duties depend on their social aptitudes. Self-realization, means, the achievement of health, happiness, knowledge, beauty and virtue. The ideal of human life and especially, the achievement of that ideal in which fits a person in born attitude, which raises him to the height of personality and through which he/she can make his/her best contribution to the progress of humanity. Hence, self-realization of different personalities depends upon the development of different aptitudes. But, in everyone it means, the realization of the ideal, rational or social self in co-operation and intimate union with society. Thus, self-realization consists in the regulation and transformation of the sentient self by the rational self. Happiness is the feeling of the self-realization. It arises from the systemization of the desires.

## 3. Features of the perfectionism

### 1. Harmonization of hedonism and rationalism:-

Perfectionism establishes harmony between two contradictory theories 'Hedonism' and 'rationalism'. Hedonism aims at the pleasure or self satisfaction which is the highest good and proper aim of human life. Whereas, Rationalism aims towards self sacrifice or self negation. Eudaemonism reconciles both these theories by aiming at self realization or self improvement. Perfectionism regards the self as an organic unity of 'sensibility' and 'reason'. The self is permanent spiritual principle in which sensibility is organized and regulated by reason. Both, having the proper place and function in the self. It is a concrete spiritual state organizing them into a unity.

Perfectionism regards perfection or realization of the concrete total self, both, 'Sentient' and 'Rational' as the highest good.

## **2. Harmonization of selfishness and unselfishness:-**

The harmonization of selfishness and unselfishness is necessary for the realization of the entire self. Perfectionism is the consummation of both passion and reason and in it is the harmony of selfishness and unselfishness. It is the happy harmonious development of passions and reason. The rational part is social and the sentient part is individual of the self of any human being. The rational part of self advocates the complete elimination of the sentient part. Therefore, the inferior self has to be transformed by realization of the superior self.

## **3. The vitality of self-sacrifice for self-improvement:-**

Superior rational self and the inferior sentient self are two aspects of complete self. We can realize the superior self only through the means of society because this elevated self or higher self is a social self. The attainment of the higher self does not need the suppression of inferior self because the possibility of improvement exists in the lower self. The aim of the perfectionist theory is the realization of an ideal order in which there is both individual and social welfare. Therefore, Self-sacrifice is needed for the attainment of this ideal. In this, the animal nature will have to be sacrificed.

## **4. Be a Person:-**

Perfectionism stresses to the development of character through organization of innate desires and passions. Personality is not a 'means' but, is the 'end'. Thus, it tries to strive for the realization of our personality and respect for the personality of others.

## **5. Equilibrium of society and the individual:-**

The perfectionist theory is good for the society and to the individual, as, it maintains a balance between both by ensuring the feeling of common good as the personal good in the individual.

## **6. Pleasure and happiness:-**

Pleasure is transient and happiness is permanent. Perfectionism accepts the difference between happiness and pleasure or satisfaction of passions. But, its aim is not happiness, for; happiness is the result of achieving the goal. Happiness becomes available from a continuous development of the self after the passions have been controlled and organized.

## **7. Conscience and moral obligation:-**

Conscience, according to perfectionism is not a unique, inexplicable, part of the self, but, it is the whole self which imposes its law or command upon a particular manifestation of it.

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Thus, conscience is identical with the whole self. Moral obligation is essentially self-imposed. It is imposed by the self upon itself. It is imposed by the ideal self upon the actual self by the rational self upon the 'sentient self'. Moral obligation never be transcended, it can never disappear in the course of moral progress.

## **4. Interpretation of perfectionism**

There are two interpretation of 'perfectionism'-

(a) Idealist and (b) Biological

The idealistic viewpoint of perfectionism was established by Plato, Aristotle, Green, Bradley and Hegel.

On the other hand, the biological viewpoint of perfectionism was established by Herbert Spencer, Leslie Stephen and Alexander.

## **5. Perfectionism Versus Hedonism**

Hedonism is the theory and practice of seeking maximum pleasure for its own sake. Hedonism leads one towards extreme selfishness. This cannot be considered as similar to perfectionism because hedonist do not claim that pleasure is an objective 'good', it is only the fulfillment of individual urges, desires and preferences which can conflicts with prioritizing most "objective goods" since enjoying yourself can easily conflict with self improvement or making the best life for yourself or others.

## **6. Evaluation**

Since, the rational self and the sentient self are the two aspects of a complete self; therefore, the perfection of entire self is the goal of perfectionism. The lower self only be corrected through the control over passions by reason. Happiness is linked to perfection and this can be attained only through the realization of superior self by self-improvement. The rational faculty of the self categorizes the mankind above any other creatures of this cosmos.

## **7. Conclusion**

The ultimate goal of perfectionism is the perfection of integral self. In the process of perfection, the passions or desires are fulfilled but they are later on transformed through the reason. Perfectionism harmonizes the notions of hedonism and rationalism through self sacrifice for self improvement. . Perfectionism harmonizes gross and refined hedonism by elevating the lower self to the superior self through the means of reason which makes a man different from animals. Perfectionism is the effort to be better in the moral sense which helps us to achieve a meaningful and better world. It is the duty and task of growth and improvement that gives direction and sense to human action in a world that is open and in a state of frequent or perpetual change.

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