

Perfectionism or Desire for Perfection

Are We Getting It Right?

A Critique on the Suppression of Perfectionism or Desire for Perfection by Psychologists

If you see some perfectionist traits in yourself, do not get disappointed!

You have probably come across the terms perfectionism or desire for perfection. Some of us wear these terms as badges of honor, while others struggle with them so much they seek professional help. We all grapple with perfectionism, but our reactions and approaches vary widely. The question is:

- What is the concept of perfectionism or desire for perfection, and what are its characteristics?
- Where does it originate from?
- Is the concept of perfectionism fundamentally different from the desire for perfection?
- What are the types of perfectionism, and what are the bad things that can happen when someone becomes too focused on being perfect?
- In general, is perfectionism good or not?

To understand any concept, the first step is to focus on the definition of its most fundamental aspect, which in this case is the concept of perfection. Generally, perfection is the quality or state of being complete and perfect, and perfectionism

is usually defined as the need to be perfect or appear perfect. At first glance, perfectionism may seem as a prerequisite for achieving success. But it refers to a characteristic in which an individual constantly sets unrealistic and idealistic goals for himself, making life bitter by imposing excessive strictness and experiencing severe self-dissatisfaction. In fact, what distinguishes the concept of perfectionism from achieving success is the sense of blame, excessive hard work, and constant criticism of oneself and others.

The Characteristic of Perfectionists

Perhaps, the most tangible way to understand the characteristics of anything is to see a practical example of it. In this regard, reviewing the characteristics of perfectionists will certainly help us understand the concept of perfectionism better:

- They usually set high standards for themselves and feel a sense of failure, depression, and anxiety if they do not achieve their goals.
- They constantly compare themselves to an ideal and perfect model of a human being.
- They put off tasks because of their fear of failure.
- They spend a lot of time on simple tasks because they want to be perfect in everything.
- They constantly criticize others and their work because they believe nothing is flawless.

-They avoid delegating tasks to others because they believe others lack the ability to accomplish them perfectly.

Such individuals have an all-or-nothing thinking; they solely focus on the outcome of the actions, neglecting tasks and putting them off because they fear to do them imperfectly and have low self-esteem. Of course, not all these traits may appear together in one perfectionist, but by observing a few of them, one can generally conclude whether an individual is perfectionist or not.

Knowing the characteristics of perfectionists from a psychological point of view, it is worth acknowledging the importance of distinguishing between successful individuals and perfectionist ones:

Excessive focus on controlling tasks is a criterion for identifying unhealthy perfectionism. In fact, a perfectionist constantly focuses on his shortcomings, and even if he achieves success, he blames himself for his weaknesses. On the other hand, a successful person is happy with his achievements and learns from his mistakes and weaknesses.

Types of Perfectionism

Now that we are familiar with the concept of perfectionism and the characteristics of perfectionists, we had better get acquainted with the types of perfectionism. Most scholars and prominent figures in this field divide perfectionism into three categories:

-Self-Oriented Perfectionism: It can be divided into personal standards perfectionism and self-critical perfectionism. In the first category, an individual

holds a set of standards that motivate him, and he is committed to achieving them. However, in the second one, the individual has high expectations of himself. Because he has not achieved his goals, he experiences anxiety and disappointment, and he keeps condemning himself for his failure.

-Socially-Prescribed Perfectionism: It is a type of perfectionism in which an individual feels stressed and believes that other people expect him to be perfect and that these other people will be highly critical of him if he fails to meet expectations. These expectations, often coming from his parents, friends, or work, are so powerful that the person has absorbed them into his own thoughts and beliefs. Ultimately, due to his fear of rejection from and criticism of others, he suffers from low self-confidence, anxiety, and self-doubt.

-Other-Oriented Perfectionism: In this type of perfectionism, an individual has high expectations from others. He questions people's abilities and performance and expects more from them. His behavior can even lead to anger and make him unable to establish intimate, healthy, and trusting relationships with others.

Apart from these types, psychologists often categorize perfectionism into positive and negative forms, separating positive desire for perfection from negative perfectionism. While many psychologists focus more on the negative aspects of perfectionism and generally consider it an unhealthy desire, there are some who acknowledge the value of the positive aspects of perfectionism and believe that healthy perfectionism can lead to motivation, increased achievements, and improved performance.

In essence, according to this definition, what distinguishes positive perfectionism from the negative one is the emotional response it generates. If a person has the

capacity to accept his mistakes and can adapt himself to changing circumstances or uncontrollable conditions, his perfectionism is considered positive. However, if it leads to anxiety, self-blame, and an expectation of flawlessness, it is categorized as negative perfectionism.

It is noteworthy that according to this definition, everyone is perfectionist to some extent, but some use it positively while others lose control of it.

The Causes of Perfectionism

If we look more accurately at our surroundings, we see that there are many who admire and encourage individuals based on their achievements. This can play a significant role in the individuals' becoming perfectionists because those who have experienced repeated success are more prone to this desire. On the other hand, not receiving the necessary encouragement and validation in childhood can also contribute to the development of perfectionism. That is because it creates a sense of inadequacy and insecurity in individuals through repeated fear of disapproval by others, increasing their efforts to be flawless. Of course, psychologists consider the concept of perfectionism to be the result of a combination of genetic and environmental factors rather than a specific factor. According to them, factors such as obsessive-learning disorder, perfectionist, critical or strict parents, and experiencing fear and unhealthy behaviors during childhood can all lead to the development of perfectionism.

As a rule, in this issue just like other ones, there is a group of individuals who, due to their personal or social background, have more signs of perfectionism. For example, studies have shown that conscientious individuals and those who

experience negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, or emotional instability are more prone to be perfectionists. However, it should be noted that being conscientious is a positive trait that usually involves being careful and accurate and it often leads to positive perfectionism rather than its negative form.

Another point is that our desires and characteristics, whether positive or negative, can manifest themselves and become more prominent in certain areas, and perfectionism is no exception to this rule. This trait can be found mostly in the following situations:

- Having a negative body image
- Extreme obsession with education
- Sensitivity towards the needs and expectations of others, and fear of upsetting or disappointing them due to affection and fear of rejection
- Imposing pressure on children to excel in school, sports, etc., or excessive criticism of their performance
- the way someone speaks, writes, and does physical activities and sports, especially when alone; obsession with beauty or keeping the house clean; and following strict and specific routines for daily tasks, sleep, or diet.

Perfectionism: Identifying the Problems and Curing Them

So far, we have discussed the concept of perfectionism from a psychological perspective, the characteristics of perfectionists, types of perfectionism, the difference between positive and negative perfectionism, factors influencing the

development of perfectionism, and the situations where this desire reveals itself more. Now, let us delve into the psychological problems regarding perfectionism.

Psychologically, high levels of perfectionism can lead to anxiety, depression, eating disorders (such as anorexia or bulimia), sleep disorder, and other mental health disorders. It can also result in low self-esteem, lack of energy and ability, anger, frustration, helplessness, obsessive-compulsive thinking patterns, etc. But how can we overcome perfectionism from the perspective of psychologists?

Basically, there are solutions to treat everything. These can lead to a reduction in symptoms or a complete recovery. Since the concept of perfectionism or desire for perfection is often considered as a negative trait in psychology, different strategies and treatment methods have been purposed to treat its different levels. Some psychologists believe that perfectionism, even at its low levels, can lead to numerous damages and problems, and if it is more deeply rooted, it becomes a disorder that requires the help of a counselor or psychologist.

In essence, a psychologist or counselor identifies the core beliefs that contribute to a person's perfectionism by examining his initial experiences. They help the individual understand when perfectionism becomes a source of strength and when it shows itself as a weakness. Ultimately, their goal is to stop the individual blaming himself and feeling inadequate. Psychologists aim to help perfectionists find new ways to think about their goals and achievements through cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT).

Some strategies that can be effective in managing perfectionism include early detection of perfectionist tendencies, letting go of the "musts," focusing on positive aspects, setting realistic goals, taking smaller steps towards success, and

distinguishing between putting in effort and the concept of perfectionism. These approaches can greatly contribute to controlling this desire.

The Difference between Perfectionism and the Desire for Perfection

When exploring the concept of perfection, we often encounter two terms: perfectionism and desire for perfection. In English, the term 'perfectionism' is used both in psychology and behavioral sciences to discuss having high standards, as well as in philosophy, ethics, and politics to define goodness and virtue in an objective manner. However, in some other languages, individuals in psychology may use "perfectionism," while in ethics, politics, and philosophy, the "desire for perfection" is often used. Some argue that there is no need to differentiate between these two terms and that individuals understand their meanings based on the context they are presented in. Thus, they consider them synonymous.

In truth, we are the ones who give meaning to words and determine their significance. The same applies to the concept of perfectionism and desire for perfection. Both perfectionism in psychology and desire for perfection in Islamic philosophy refer to the idea of seeking and desiring perfection. The main distinction lies in how we perceive these terms: 'Perfectionism' often carries a negative connotation, implying an undesirable tendency, while 'desire for perfection' is viewed more positively, representing an aspiration we strive for.

The Concept of Perfectionism or Desire for Perfection in Islamic Philosophy

As we mentioned earlier, to understand any subject, it is necessary to explore its essence and origin. The concept of perfection in Islamic philosophy differs from its common interpretation which is the pursuit of superiority and striving for completeness and flawlessness. This distinction also leads to a difference in perspective between Islamic philosophy and psychology regarding the concept of perfectionism or desire for perfection. While psychology often views perfectionism as a negative and harmful trait, Islamic philosophy regards it as an innate human characteristic, valuing it as a human desire.

From the viewpoint of Islamic philosophy, perfection is the actualization of capabilities and effects inherent in something. In other words, perfection is the ultimate state that something strives to achieve. Thus, both psychology and Islamic philosophy recognize the concept of perfectionism or desire for perfection as having the desire to be perfect. However, their definitions and origins are different.

In Islamic philosophy, the origin of human desire for perfection lies in the desire for infinity. Since human beings possess an immaterial and infinite origin, they always seek infinity, i.e., the thing with which they are compatible. This desire for newness, infinity, and perfection can be observed in all the dimensions of human existence.

We constantly strive to somehow satisfy our desire for infinity. We drink water to quench our thirst, eat food to satiate hunger, and express our emotions and affection towards our children, spouse, and friends in various situations. Similarly, to fulfill our desire for infinity, we strive to be the best in everything and to

acquire all possible perfections in that area. Once we reach our desired goal, we abandon it and set higher goals and ideals for ourselves. In fact, due to our *fitri* (innate) desire for infinity, we humans seek everything in the best possible way and form. However, at every level of knowledge, we define infinity based on that level and shape our lives, goals, and aspirations accordingly. Our desire for infinity does not require justification. It is sufficient to reflect on ourselves and our desires to see if we place any limits on our wishes, or just when we attempt to put an endpoint for our long list of desires, another wish and desire come to our mind.

The Root of Our Perfectionism

As we stated, Islamic philosophy considers the desire for infinity as the root of the concept of perfectionism or desire for perfection. Since humans are infinity-seeking beings, they are always in search of absolute perfection or infinity, because only by attaining their lost ideal can they find peace.

In fact, there is a *fitri* desire for infinity in us. However, our mistake lies in considering material world as the origin of our desire for infinity and try to fulfill it with material tools. While anyone with a sound mind knows that limited resources cannot satisfy unlimited desires, and fundamentally, such a thing is impossible.

Perfectionism is a quality that stems from the infinite dimension of our existence, and just as thirst can only be quenched with water, perfectionism can only be satisfied through connecting with the Infinite Being. At its core, the human soul has a deep, endless longing to return to its perfect and limitless origin. Therefore,

wherever it sees a trace of its lost one, i.e., absolute perfection, it moves towards it; when it perceives that thing as distant from its desired perfection, it becomes disillusioned and turns towards another form of perfection.

By understanding the explanations about the concept of perfectionism or desire for perfection, we can almost comprehend why Islamic philosophy believes that perfectionism cannot be suppressed. When we are starving and desperately seek something to satisfy our hunger, if someone tells us that this is a false desire and should be disregarded, how would we feel? Naturally, we would be indifferent to what they say and keep looking for something to it. In fact, our feeling of hunger is so instinctive and evident that it does not require external validation.

When a desire originates from within us, it cannot be suppressed; even if all efforts are made to eliminate or suppress it, it somehow reveals itself. Just as if we block a spring, we must inevitably wait for water to leak from another place.

The desire for infinity, like any other desire, such as the desire for beauty, marriage, eating, or sleep, is an innate desire and must be met properly. In the section on the problems of perfectionism, we mentioned some of the issues and problems that arise as a result of incorrect responses to the concept of perfectionism or the desire for perfection. Ignoring or suppressing this desire has severe consequences, which will be discussed below.

The Consequences of Suppressing the Desire for Perfection

Let us understand the consequences of neglecting a desire through a simple example: Imagine someone denying their desire to eat. This denial leads to physical weakness, loss of power, and ultimately coma, or even death.

Similarly, the desire for perfection, which stems from our desire for infinity, must be met properly. Otherwise, it leads to despair and robs us of happiness and peace. This is because we experience this desire and feel the pressure that builds up inside us when we do not address it. However, since we are unaware of its true origin, we lack the ability to respond appropriately. Consequently, we either lose our happiness and inner peace or fall into despair due to failure in achieving our desired perfection. Since this desire has immaterial essence, it cannot fundamentally be satisfied by limited and material worldly resources. In order to satisfy and cultivate this desire, we need to know the human and infinite dimension of our existence.

The desire for infinity is the driving force of our lives, propelling us forward and preventing our stagnation. Since this desire innately exists in all of us, it spontaneously manifests itself in various dimensions of our existence. We desire all forms of perfection because we perceive them as bringing us closer to infinity. We seek the highest level of perfection, aiming to get closer to infinity. In reality, the reason behind our desire for perfection and trying new things is that we are in search of infinite perfection. Yet, we do not find any absolute and infinite perfection that we are innately compatible with, and this leads us to become disheartened and turn towards another form of perfection. Suppressing and

neglecting perfectionism will not help us. Rather, knowing the origin of this desire and addressing it in the right way can be incredibly rewarding and insightful.

In this article, we examined the concept of perfectionism or desire for perfection and its difference from the perspective of psychology and Islamic philosophy. We stated that psychology often views perfectionism as an unhealthy and damaging drive to achieve absolute completeness and flawlessness. It encourages individuals to overcome and suppress this desire, seeing it as a source of stress and dysfunction. Meanwhile, Islamic philosophy regards perfectionism as a *fitri* characteristic of humans, looking for its root in our desire for infinity. Islamic philosophy recognizes the authenticity of perfectionism or desire for perfection and believes that since this desire has an infinite and immaterial origin, it cannot be satisfied with limited worldly means. Instead, it should be responded with its appropriate means, that is, our human and infinite dimension.

What are your thoughts on the concept of perfectionism or desire for perfection? Are you going to embrace it as a part of yourself, or are you trying to push it away?