

Analyzing the Fallacy of Demanding Perfection

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Abstract: Applying basic concepts of Logic-Based Therapy (LBT), this paper addresses the author's own struggle with demanding perfection, and seeks to provide a model for others to emulate.

Philosophy has always been a subject that has “flown under the radar” in the eyes of the public, at least in contemporary times. People generally believe that a philosophical idea, like a great wine, takes many years to develop into something that can be enjoyed. But contrary to this popular assumption, one does not have to be dead for hundreds of years to contribute to philosophy. It is indeed a dynamic field that examines a multitude of thought processes through a myriad of lenses.

One of these up and coming “lenses” is the Logic Based Therapy (LBT) approach. Created by Dr. Elliot Cohen, it specializes in examining emotional and behavioral aspects of life through philosophical means. One of the ideas Cohen stresses through LBT is that the psychological and philosophical fields are not as different as people believe and can both help fix irrational thinking. In his book, *The New Rational Therapy*, Cohen states that:

“my philosophical approach began to take shape in the mid-1980s when I realized that we philosophers could effect a psychological revolution by helping to reunite psychology with its philosophical approach. These were the early days when very few of my colleagues were thinking about getting into the trenches to help fellow humans grapple with problems of ordinary life...Paradoxically, it may be precisely because so many of us do not heed the wisdom of great minds that we persist in irrational emotions and self-destructive behavior in the first place (Cohen, 3-4).”

The primary difference between a psychological approach and Cohen's approach is simply that the former focuses on the causes of the issues, and the latter looks at the reasoning that led to the problem. LBT's mission is to analyze the reasoning in order to identify and eliminate the bad logic (hence the name Logic-Based Therapy). In the LBT spectrum, there are eleven cardinal fallacies that lead to almost all irrational thinking. Each of these fallacies has a transcendent or guiding virtue that represents what it takes to conquer the irrational thinking. Once the fallacy is identified, the key is to use its corresponding virtue to find an antidote that will help the patient counteract the bad logic they are facing. This is where one looks into the philosophies of the world and picks out a mindset that they agree with and can live by. Once they find this philosophy, they must apply it in a way that will prevent the irrational thinking from occurring again.

This paper will examine one of the cardinal fallacies, look at the cardinal fallacy in the context of a real-life scenario, see which philosophers have work that can be applied to the scenario, and then actually apply it to the situation. Multiple philosophers will be used in order to signify that it is possible to find several methods of fixing a single fallacy. It is hoped that through the use of a personal scenario, the reader will gain a “gut-level” understanding of how to create and apply philosophical antidotes.

The fallacy in question is the infamous need to “Demand Perfection.” The first fallacy Cohen depicts in *The New Rational Therapy*, is summarized as needing to have the world conform to a certain state of perfection. If it fails to meet this exactly, then the world is not the way it must be (Cohen, 27). He claims that this is the most common occurring fallacy of them all and is also the most fundamental. The point that needs to be made about this fallacy is that it is simply an unrealistic view of life that we believe must be absolute. The key to evading this irrational pitfall is to simply accept that this world and everything in it lacks certainty (the virtue of metaphysical security). According to Cohen: “metaphysical security refers to the ability to accept imperfections in reality. The metaphysically secure person accepts his human fallibility and limitations as well as others and does not expect the world to be perfect (Cohen, 17).”

The scenario is a personal struggle that I have been entrenched in for the majority of my life. It is a fear of failure, particularly in the realms of academics and sports (ice hockey). I have always been commended for my hard-working personality and dedicated attitude, whether it is in the classroom or at the ice rink. My mindset is to be the best that I can in what I do, but this comes at a great sacrifice. I bear a great mental burden whenever I fall short of my bar. Accepting failure is something that does not happen often and does not sit well with me. I worry that if I fall short of the standard I set for myself that will not only disappoint myself but my family and friends around me. I also fear that making mistakes and accepting them as tolerable will only lower the bar I set for myself. This will gradually lead to me living a life based on doing the bare minimum I can get away with and laziness. So in order to prevent this from happening, I religiously hold myself to a high standard. I worry and stress so much about accomplishing the tasks that it almost drives me insane. It is a difficult way to live life, but the only way that I know how.

So, as previously stated, the primary cardinal fallacy here is demanding perfection, although it can be argued that self-damnation is at work here as well. I irrationally believe that I must be the best at what I put my mind to or I am a complete failure. I force myself through stress and fear in order to achieve an impossible goal. My rule is: If I am not perfect in what I do, then I am a failure. So according to this rule, any error I make signifies that I am a failure. Living in fear of making a mistake is no way to go through life. It is clearly demonstrated that living with this mentality is illogical and unrealistic, but yet this is one of the most common human fallacies.

The transcendent or guiding virtue for demanding perfection is metaphysical security. So a philosophy must be found that has a mindset that can lead to acceptance of who I am in the world. This will allow me to change my rule, become more accepting of mistakes, and more realistic about the goals I set for myself.

The first philosopher to offer wisdom on the subject is the great Saint Thomas Aquinas. The Italian priest from the 13th century was well known for combining Aristotelian ideas with Christian ones. Aquinas advocated the difference between superficial and enduring goods. Because we are humans who have intellectual limitations, we cannot always determine which

good is better than the other. Therefore we must use judgement and character to simply make the best choice we can. The only being that is perfect is God and it is impossible to attempt to be exactly like God (Floyd).

Dr. Cohen also touches on Aquinas's ideas in his book. He uses this quote from Aquinas to build an antidote for demanding perfection: "Accept your fallible human nature and therewith the endless challenge of becoming more self-actualized; instead of ruminating about what is negative in your life, recognize also what is positive and good and seek to attain more of the same (Cohen, 28)." In addition to this quote, Cohen reiterates the concept that God is the only perfect being and that we cannot overcome all of our deficiencies. Cohen also mentions the difference between perfection and human excellence. He goes on to state: "that there is a fundamental difference between 'shooting for the stars' as a method of self- improvement and demanding that you land on them. As such, he would encourage you to shoot for the stars (to become like God). At the same time, he would admonish you against demanding that you reach them (Cohen, 29)."

Between these two perspectives of Aquinas's ideas we can formulate an antidote that will eliminate this perfection infection. Although they both say the ideas in different verbiage, the message is the same: no human being can be perfect. We must use the human intellect and judgement that we have to try to continually improve on what we can. So in the case of the scenario, I need to accept that it is impossible to rid myself of flaws, as is the same for everyone. Instead of worrying about every mistake I make, I should focus on improving on a single aspect of myself every time I am in class studying or at the rink playing hockey. While I am doing this I should strive to avoid mistakes, but not condemn myself if I happen to make one. If I look at it from this perspective, the goal is much easier to attain than to demand that I am perfect every time. I thus achieve metaphysical security and, with time, am able to live without demanding flawlessness.

Looking at perfection through a difference lens is the illustrious William James. James view point on things differs a bit from Aquinas but his message is still the same: perfection is unattainable and undesirable. James insists that we: "Drop the practically absurd demand for a perfect universe and accept instead the possibility of a better one (Cohen, 40)." His point in this is that it is a waste of time to talk about something that is impossible. Cohen also goes on to state that James believed a universe which was completely perfect would be disappointing. He claims that:

This would be a stagnant universe in which there would be no room for improvement, and it would be one in which the concept of freedom would be empty. It would be a universe in which there could be no courage because there would be no danger; no heroic feats; no self-sacrificing acts; no great breakthroughs in medical science that save many lives; no innovative ways to improve life; no opportunities to 'live dangerously,' to fail miserably, and to learn from it; no right to be wrong, and no freedom to choose between right and wrong (except in the trivial sense in which you always choose rightly) (Cohen, 41).

So instead of feeling upset about not living in a perfect world, James believes we should be grateful that we live in an imperfect world. This gives us ample opportunity to improve, a luxury we would not have in a perfect world.

In addition to this concept, James puts forth a hypothetical situation that further supports this argument. He proposes creating a world where “the perfection of which shall be conditional merely, the condition being that each person does its own ‘level best (Slater, 226)” In this world the ability to pursue personal pleasure is not guaranteed by safety. James believed that we would much rather choose this world than one with freedom replaced by safety. He states that: “the reason why most of us would make this choice, he suggests, is because we tend to care more about fulfilling our moral obligations and exercising our capacities than about being safe (Slater, 226).”

Applying James theory may be simpler than Aquinas’s ideas. I must look at each mistake as an opportunity to do better, and be thankful that I live in a world where I have the opportunity to improve on what I do each time I attempt it. So every time I let a puck get past me on the ice or I miss a test question, I learn from the mistake and look to continually improve. I would rather choose opportunity over safety, and must remember to live by that each and every day.

In brief, demanding perfection can be a troublesome experience if not dealt with correctly. But through the methods of LBT, I was able to examine the philosophies of Saint Aquinas and William James and give myself a few options to conquer my relentless demand for faultlessness. Through these philosophies I was able to directly mold them to my personal predicament and make strides toward increased metaphysical security. This process can be applied to any of the cardinal fallacies and can potentially lead one down the path of serenity, success, and profound happiness.

Bibliography

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