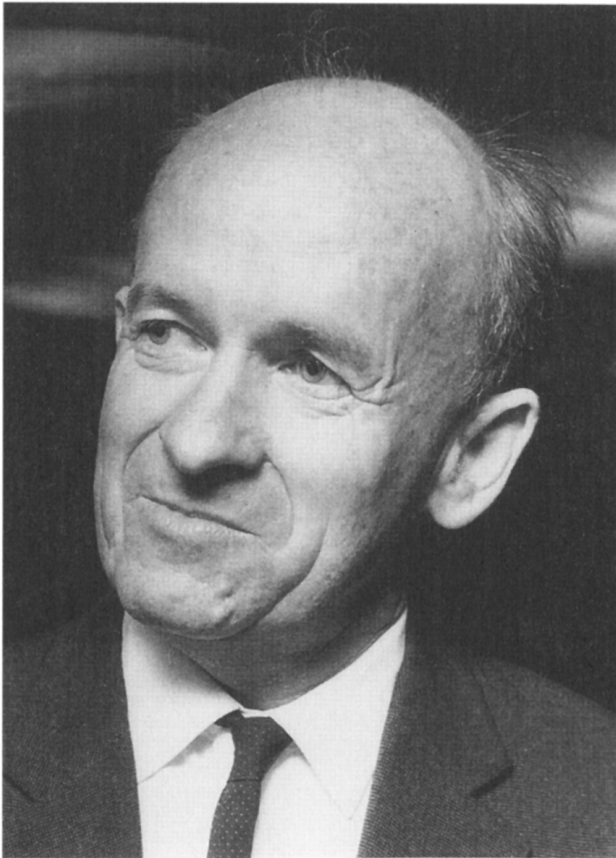


## THE PERFECTIBILITY OF MAN

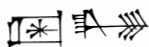


*John Passmore*

# THE PERFECTIBILITY OF MAN

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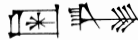
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*The Perfectibility of Man! Ah  
heaven,  
what a dreary theme!*  
D. H. LAWRENCE

*Mortal things suit mortals best.*  
PINDAR

## CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xiii</i>
1. <i>Perfection and Perfectibility</i>	1
2. <i>From Olympus to the Form of the Good</i>	29
3. <i>The Godlike Man: Aristotle to Plotinus</i>	58
4. <i>Christianity Rejects Perfection: The Elements</i>	96
5. <i>Pelagius and His Critics</i>	138
6. <i>Perfectibility Within Christianity: The Ascetico-Mystical Tradition</i>	174
7. <i>Perfectibility Within Christianity: Protestant and Heretical</i>	202
8. <i>Perfecting by Social Action: The Presuppositions</i>	226
9. <i>Governmentalists, Anarchists, and Geneticists</i>	262
10. <i>The Perfecting of Man by Scientific Progress</i>	295
11. <i>Progress by Natural Development: From Joachim to Marx</i>	332
12. <i>Progress by Natural Development: From Darwin to Teilhard</i>	378
13. <i>Perfection Renounced: The Dystopians</i>	413
14. <i>Mysticism and Humanity</i>	453
15. <i>The New Mysticism: Paradise Now</i>	479
<i>Subject Index</i>	<i>513</i>
<i>Name and Title Index</i>	<i>521</i>

## PREFACE

Like any other author I should like my readers to read every word I have written. But this is a somewhat unusual book, covering three thousand years and delving into philosophy, theology, religions—Eastern and Western—political and social ideals, even theatre. I can excuse readers who sometimes find themselves at a loss. This preface is meant to help them find their way, to discover what particularly interests them, to avoid swamps—swamps which other readers, with a different training, will recognize as solid ground.

When I began to work on this book I soon discovered that the words *perfection* and *perfectibility* were used in a variety of ways. I set about distinguishing them. That effort takes up the whole of the first chapter. Those who are bored by the making and relating of distinctions, which others may enjoy as an analytical exercise, will do best to turn to pages 25–28, where the results are set out. Or they may turn back to the first chapter, if in their later reading they may be troubled by a reference to a particular form of perfectibility.

Chapters 2 and 3 are essentially devoted to that creator of so many of our ideas, Greek philosophy. On pages 94–95 the outcome of these chapters is summarized, and some readers, not all, will find it preferable to read that summary before they read the chapters. If they feel the need for more background information, the books mentioned in numbered notes on pages 38–94 may be of help. The chapters are of central importance.

The early Greek writers would not allow even the gods to be perfect. Christianity took God to be perfect. But a battle ensued about human beings. Was perfection possible for them, or could they do no more than lower their level of imperfectibility? Chapters 4 through 7 are devoted to this

theme. It is by no means dead. There are those who turn to Eastern religions in search of perfection. Some understanding of these past debates is essential not only for the understanding of historical debates, but also of present-day aspirations. These chapters are summarized on pages 223–25.

If some readers are mainly interested in these religious disputes, others may think that we have reached the heart of the book only when we embark upon secular means of reaching perfection, as in the attempt to assist the course of history understood to be by nature progressive. I do not think any guidance is necessary for the readers of these chapters, 8 through 12. Occasional names may be unfamiliar, but very few; it was not thought necessary to introduce chapter summaries.

There have been plenty of perfectionists and some of them have been very persistent—just a few years ago in Moscow a famous physicist told me that the Soviet Union was bound to become a perfect country with perfect people; this was just, he said, a matter of logic. But even before the 1914–18 war and the depression, which not long afterwards emerged on a great scale, dystopians made their presence felt. The chapter entitled “Perfection Renounced” is in essence a critical look at tendencies in the twentieth-century intellectual world. It needs no special guidance.

The same is true of the final chapter, “The New Mysticism,” but it introduces philosophical contrasts between play, games, and love that are, I think, vital to an understanding and critique of mysticism. It is perhaps worth noting that when this book first appeared in the United States a critic told the world that it would have been a good book if it had consisted only of the last three chapters. I hope that a new generation of readers will be conscious, as many earlier readers were, of the fact that our past is still alive in our present.

A final point. The extensive references are precisely that.



They can be left alone, except by those who want to check what I have written or to engage in further reading.

John Passmore

Professor Emeritus  
Australian National University  
Canberra  
March 1999

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My theme is a vast one, and I have traced it through three thousand years of man's intellectual history, from Homer to the present day. Inevitably, this is not in the fullest sense a work of scholarship; the fragments out of which I have tried to construct a mosaic were, in large part, excavated by other hands. In the process of writing this book I have learnt a great deal; I can only hope that my readers will learn if not as much, at least something, by reading it. If they do, it will be because I have succeeded in communicating to them what so many scholars have taught me, many more scholars than I have been able to particularize by name.

As for more personal acknowledgements, a number of my colleagues and post-graduate students have read, or heard as seminar papers, chapters of this book in one or the other of its many early versions. They have drawn my attention to a good many errors of fact, mistakes of judgement, and clumsiness in expression. For their critical attention to the opening chapters of the book, I should like particularly to thank Evan Burge and John Kleinig. (They have not, I should add in all fairness to them, seen the book in its final, or even in a near-final, form.) A considerable burden has fallen upon Mrs. Elizabeth Short in correcting my inveterate inaccuracy. Thanks are also due to Mrs. Glenda McIntyre, Mrs. Mavis Rose, Mrs. Estelle Haynes and Mrs. Diane Murray, for coping with the vagaries of my handwriting and the multiplicity of my interlinings, through innumerable retypings. My wife, as ever, has been called upon to contribute well beyond the normal limits of domestic responsibility. Finally, I should like to acknowledge once more my enormous indebtedness to the late Professor John Anderson. I have not found it possible to quote him; my in-

debtedness is to his lectures and to conversational remarks rather than to his publications. He would have profoundly disagreed with a great deal of what I have written, but it would never have been written were it not that I had the great good fortune to be one of his students.

JOHN PASSMORE  
Australian National University,  
Canberra  
December 1969

## **THE PERFECTIBILITY OF MAN**

## ONE

### PERFECTION AND PERFECTIBILITY

When, in everyday life, men are accounted perfect, this is most commonly in relation to their performance of a task or in a role. In such contexts, “perfect” acts as a superlative. A forger can be good, very good, excellent, or perfect at imitating signatures; an accountant can be good, very good, excellent, or perfect at drawing up balance-sheets. A perfect secretary, a perfect forger, a perfect accountant, all attain to the highest possible standards in the tasks they undertake. But this by no means implies that they are perfect in the performance of other tasks, in other roles. The perfect forger does not necessarily keep perfect accounts, nor is the perfect accountant always a perfect secretary. Even more obviously, he need not be a perfect man.

Indeed, it is a serious question whether perfection in this sense—let us call it “technical perfection”—has any intelligible application to man as such. That it has, Martin Foss, for one, denies. “Society,” he writes, “simplifies and abbreviates its members to executors of their social purposes, their social professions. . . . If they are adequate to their purpose in the social scheme, they are called perfect. So we have perfect typists, perfect lawyers, perfect accountants. But are there also ‘perfect men’? I do not think so.”<sup>1\*</sup> This is a pleasantly rapid way of rejecting the perfectibility of man.

1. Martin Foss: *The Idea of Perfection in the Western World* (Princeton, 1946; paperback ed., Lincoln, Neb., 1964), p. 9.

\* Numbered footnotes refer quotations to their source or indicate the origin of a piece of information. They can safely be ignored except by those who wish to question the accuracy, or explore the context, of a quotation. Footnotes which are ancillary to the understanding of the text, or pursue a by-path, will be found, as here, on the page to which they refer. [In this edition, numbered notes have been moved to the page of citation.]

Being human is not a profession, nor does it by itself fulfil a social purpose. If, then, there is no other kind of perfection, or none applicable to human beings, except technical perfection, it is natural to conclude that *man as such*—as distinct from a secretary *qua* secretary or an accountant *qua* accountant—cannot, by the very nature of the case, attain to perfection.

This deduction admits of a number of replies. The nineteenth-century philosophical anarchist William Godwin, at least in his later writings, argues that if each man is perfectible in a task, then it follows that man as such is perfectible. “Putting idiots and extraordinary cases out of the question, every human creature,” so Godwin maintains, “is endowed with talents, which, if rightly directed, would shew him to be apt, adroit, intelligent and acute, in the walk for which his organization especially fitted him.” Each individual man, that is, has a set of talents which enable him to be trained to perform a particular task. And this makes it possible, Godwin continues, for each man to produce “something as perfect in its kind, as that which is effected under another form by the more brilliant and illustrious of his species.” Each and every man, that is, can be so trained as to be technically perfect in some particular respect. And since man as such is a mere abstraction, since mankind is made up of individual men, to demonstrate that each and every man is perfectible is to demonstrate that *man* is perfectible.<sup>2</sup>

At first sight, however, there are two powerful arguments against deducing the perfectibility of man from the capacity of each man to perfect himself in some particular task. A man, we pointed out, can perfect himself in one role while being imperfect in another. He may be a perfect accountant but a dreadful public-speaker. There is an enormous gap, too, between his being a perfect accountant and his being

2. William Godwin: *Thoughts on Man* (London, 1831), pp. 36–37. For Godwin’s earlier views see chs. 9, 10 below.

a perfect man. It is one thing to say, then, that each and every man can perfect himself at *something*, quite another to say that he can perfect himself in every task he is called upon, as a human being, to perform. Secondly, a man can perfect himself not only as a secretary or an accountant but as a forger, a blackmailer, a torturer, an informer. "All men are perfectible; for even the worst of men can perfect himself as a procurer." Something seems to have gone wrong with that argument. When moralists, theologians, philosophers, dispute about whether man is "perfectible," they take it for granted that the perfection in question does not include perfection in vice. To be perfectible in a task, it again follows, is not the same thing as being perfectible as a man.

Plato's republic is designed to meet both these objections. Plato allots to each man one task and one task only, that task in which his talents and skills enable him to perfect himself. "Each individual should pursue that work in this city," writes Plato of his ideal republic, "for which his nature was naturally most fitted, each one man doing one work."<sup>3</sup> So whereas in our society a man may be a perfect accountant but a failure as a father, in Plato's republic such a man will not be permitted to act as a father: that will be somebody else's task, somebody whose talents and skills enable him to perfect himself in the task of rearing children.

As for the second objection, Plato's republic is an ideal society. An ideal State will not contain forgers, blackmailers, or procurers. So although in our everyday imperfect States there are men whose talents and skills are wholly devoted to perfecting themselves in these deplorable occupations, in an ideal State each citizen will be allocated to a morally respectable task, chosen to accord with his talents. Perhaps, then, we need do no more than slightly modify Godwin's view: man is perfectible if and only if each man has talents

3. Plato: *Republic*, Bk. IV. 433, as trans. A. D. Lindsay, Everyman's Library (London, 1935; repr. 1948), p. 120.

and skills which would fit him for the performance of the task which would be allocated to him in an ideal society.

Obviously, however, to talk thus of an “ideal” society—a perfect society, that is—is to make use of another, and different, sense of perfection, not technical perfection. A perfect society cannot be defined as one which performs its social task perfectly: it *sets* social tasks, it does not *have* a social task. More concretely, in Plato’s republic social tasks are set by a particular class of men—the “philosopher-kings” who act as its governors. No doubt, they are expert as rulers. But if they were only expert in a technical sense—good at keeping the society in order—it would be unsafe to rely upon them not to encourage such occupations as blackmailing, informing, torturing. Technically expert rulers, indeed, commonly provide more than enough employment for such skilled professions. The expertness of Plato’s rulers is a by-product of, not the sole evidence for, their perfection. They are not perfect because they rule perfectly, they rule perfectly because they are perfect, as a consequence of their having seen “the form of the good.” So, in the end, the whole structure of Plato’s republic rests on there being a variety of perfection over and above technical perfection—a perfection which consists in, or arises out of, man’s relationship to the ideal.

Even in the case of the ordinary citizen, indeed, technical perfection is not, for Plato, enough. There is, he no doubt says, an “image” of justice—of moral perfection—in “the principle that he whom nature intended for a shoemaker should attend to shoemaking and nothing else.” But it is *only* an image. True justice “does not concern a man’s management of his own external affairs, but his internal management of his soul, his truest self and his truest possessions.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, technical perfection does not automatically carry human perfection with it; if men ought to seek technical perfection, this is only as an outward expres-

4. *Ibid.*, Bk. IV. 443, trans. Lindsay, p. 133.



sion of their moral perfection, their willingness to submit their passions to rational control.

A not dissimilar analysis of the relation between technical and human perfection is sometimes to be met with in Christian thought, especially, although not solely, in the Reforming tradition. “No one,” Luther writes, “is without some commission and calling”—a set of tasks it is his responsibility to perform.<sup>5</sup> In most cases, this commission and calling is made clear to a man by the station into which he is born. “This means,” Luther tells us, “that a servant, maid, son, daughter, man, woman, lord, subject, or whoever else may belong to a station ordained by God, as long as he fills his station, is as beautiful and glorious in the sight of God as a bride adorned for her marriage.”<sup>6</sup> Men serve God best, Luther argues, by remaining in their vocation, however “mean and simple” it may be—although he does, somewhat inconsistently, allow that if a boy has *special* abilities it is the duty both of parents and of the State to make it possible for him to perfect those abilities by education.

At once, however, that difficulty arises which we have already met, although in a somewhat different context. Human beings may be born into stations which only a God considerably more broad-minded than the God of Christianity would find “beautiful and glorious.” Luther himself gives a list of “sinful” callings: “robbery, usury, public women, and as they are at present, the pope, cardinals, bishops, priests, monks and nuns.”<sup>7</sup> This list is no doubt somewhat controversial; not everybody would wish to include popes along with prostitutes. But the principle is what is impor-

5. *The Precious and Sacred Writings of Martin Luther*, ed. J. N. Lenker (Minneapolis, 1903), Vol. X: *Church Postil Gospels: Advent, Christmas and Epiphany Sermons*, p. 243, as quoted in D. R. Heiges: *The Christian's Calling* (Philadelphia, 1958), p. 50.

6. *Luther's Works*, American ed., Vol. XIII (St. Louis, 1956), p. 368, quoted in Heiges, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

7. *Luther's Table Talk*, trans. William Hazlitt (Philadelphia, 1873), p. 447, as quoted in Heiges, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

tant. Luther has to grant that the calling into which human beings are born—as a woman may be born, let us say, a temple-prostitute—is not necessarily the one, the perfect performance of which will make them “beautiful and glorious in the sight of God.”

Furthermore, although he is so emphatic that men should work diligently at their calling—and Calvin emphasizes this even more strongly—Luther does not maintain, just as Plato did not maintain, that they will reach perfection *as men* in this way. Indeed, Luther vehemently rejects the view that, in their earthly life, men can achieve perfection. He draws, too, an important distinction between technical and vocational perfection. The Christian, according to Luther, must use his vocation primarily as a way of serving his fellow-men; technical expertness is desirable only as a means to that end.\* So although technical perfection plays a part in Lutheran moral theology, it is only a small part; Luther would certainly not identify the perfectibility of man with his ability to perfect himself in any secular task or set of tasks.

A man's performance in his vocation, indeed, is to Luther important only because it demonstrates his obedience to God, and to God's plan for man—just as it is important to Plato because it demonstrates his willingness to submit himself to the rule of the philosopher-kings. This attitude is even more clearly expressed in the moral theology of Karl Barth. “Faithfulness in vocation,” he writes, “means positively that in my vocation as it is I seek, either well or badly, to do satisfactory work to the best of my ability, skill and conscience, . . . giving myself to my own particu-

\* The idea of a “calling,” in its purest form, is crystallized in the Indian caste system. “And do thy duty, even if it be humble, rather than another's, even if it be great. To die in one's duty is life: to live in another's is death.” So says the *Gītā* (2,33). Gandhi tried to introduce into the caste system the Lutheran conception of vocation as “service,” rather than as the performance of tasks. He largely failed. See, on this theme, V. S. Naipaul: *An Area of Darkness* (London, 1964), Pt. I, ch. 2. Compare what is said below (pp. 455–56) about “aristocratic pride,” nowhere better exemplified than in the caste system.

lar concern, remembering always that it is no accident but part of the plan and providence of God that it is my concern, and that God summons me to do justice to it.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, technical perfection—in so far as perfection rather than conscientious application is what is called for—matters to Barth only as a special case of *obedientary* perfection, absolute obedience to the will of God. This is man’s real task, the task all men have to undertake: the practice of a calling does no more than exemplify it.

Obedientary perfection, however, still has its problems: what guarantee is there that submission to God’s will cannot lead men into imperfection? God, to judge from the Old Testament, makes strange demands upon men, bids them to act in ways which scarcely accord with our everyday ideas about moral perfection. Can the temple-prostitute really be confident that it is not God’s will that she should continue in that station in life? But this, it might be said, is at worst the problem of determining in what God’s will consists. There can be no denying that to do what God wills, once that will has been determined, is the path to perfection. But why should this not be denied? Some theologians, like the thirteenth-century Duns Scotus, have been prepared to reply that it is self-contradictory to suppose that God would ever will men to do anything except what is good. Nothing is *meant* by “good,” on their view, except “action in accordance with God’s will”; the supposition cannot intelligibly be entertained, therefore, that it might be good to disobey God.\* But most theologians have been unhappy with the

8. Karl Barth: *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. III: *The Doctrine of Creation*, Pt. 4, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh, 1961), ch. XII, §56.2: Vocation, p. 642. This whole section on Vocation is highly relevant.

\* Even Duns Scotus made one exception. “God is to be loved” and “God must be hated or dishonoured” are, he tells us, obligations from which even God cannot grant us a dispensation. Thus he hoped to forestall the obvious objection: if “That is good” simply means “That is what God wills,” the question still remains why men should pay any attention to what God wills. William of Ockham found himself in difficulties on the same point. The articles by Allan B. Wolter on Duns Scotus and by Ernest A. Moody on William of

suggestion that “to do what God wills is good” means no more than “to do what God wills is to do what God wills.” They have suggested, rather, that God is perfect, and must be obeyed just for that reason. But obviously, God’s perfection is not obedientary perfection; God obeys nobody, not even himself. So, if this view is to be maintained, perfection has to be defined, when it applies to God, as something other than obedientary perfection. And the perfection of men’s conduct when they obey God will then lie not in their obedience as such but in the fact that their conduct reflects the perfection of God.

Summing up, to identify the perfectibility of man with his capacity to perfect himself technically in a task is to encounter insuperable difficulties—unless perfectibility is wholly divorced from moral perfection. It is only if the task can be thought of as one set by a perfect Being or in a perfect society that there is any plausibility in supposing that a man can perfect himself as a human being merely by perfecting his ability in a task. Two consequences then follow. The first is that the perfection of such a Being or such a society does not itself consist in its perfect performance of a task. The second is that a man’s perfecting himself in the performance of a task is not *in itself* sufficient to ensure his perfecting himself as a man: it is important only in so far as it bears witness to his perfection in some other, more fundamental respect, in obedience, in submission, in rational control.

Closely related to technical perfection, however, is a more philosophically complex concept of perfection—teleological perfection—which has often been invoked as the test of human perfectibility. This is the perfection which consists in a thing’s reaching its “natural end.” Its great ex-

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Ockham in Paul Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 8 vols (New York, 1967), admirably sum up the points at issue. For a fuller discussion of the philosophical problems involved see J. A. Passmore: *Ralph Cudworth* (Cambridge, 1951), ch. iv.