

The Importance Of The Perfect Not Being Allowed To Be The Enemy of The Good

Post by “Cassius” of May 18, 2023 at 10:30 AM

This is a thread specifically devoted to "perfect as the enemy of the good." Seems to me this has a lot of application in Epicurean decisionmaking, although this thread stems from the discussion of [Hegesias the Death Persuader](#). Some apparently assert that the perfect "is" the enemy of the good, but others react that we cannot allow this to be accepted. While the two things may not be the same, having the imperfect is superior to taking positions or actions that never allow us to obtain the perfect. Absence of pain may be desirable in the abstract, but for humans the only way to achieve total freedom from pain is death, and the dead can experience neither pleasure nor pain, so obsessing on total absence of pain is self-defeating for humans. That's why I think it is unfair to Epicurus to interpret him as doing so, and that when he "seems" to do so he is engaged in philosophical debate about competing philosophic definitions, not stating that we should forgo the pleasures of life in order to make sure we never experience pain.

This is the current 5/18/23 content of the [Wikipedia page](#):

Perfect is the enemy of good is an [aphorism](#) which means insistence on perfection often prevents implementation of good improvements. The [Pareto principle](#) or 80–20 rule explains this numerically. For example, it commonly takes 20% of the full time to complete 80% of a task while to complete the last 20% of a task takes 80% of the effort.^[1] Achieving absolute [perfection](#) may be impossible and so, as increasing effort results in [diminishing returns](#), further activity becomes increasingly inefficient.

Origin[[edit](#)]

In the English-speaking world the aphorism is commonly attributed to [Voltaire](#), who quoted an Italian [proverb](#) in his [Questions sur l'Encyclopédie](#) ^[fr] in 1770: "*Il meglio è l'inimico del bene*".^[2] It subsequently appeared in his [moral](#) poem, [La Bégueule](#), which starts^[3]

Quote

*Dans ses écrits, un sage Italien
Dit que le mieux est l'ennemi du bien.*

(In his writings, a wise Italian
says that the best is the enemy of the good)

Previously, around 1726, in his [Pensées](#), [Montesquieu](#) wrote "*Le mieux est le mortel ennemi du bien*" (The best is the mortal enemy of the good).^[4]

Antecedents[[edit](#)]

[Aristotle](#) and other classical philosophers propounded the principle of the [golden mean](#) which counsels against [extremism](#) in general.[5]

Its sense in English literature can be traced back to [Shakespeare](#),[6] In his tragedy, *King Lear* (1606), the [Duke of Albany](#) warns of "striving to better, oft we mar what's well" and in [Sonnet 103](#):

Quote

Were it not sinful then, striving to mend,
To mar the subject that before was well?

Variations[[edit](#)]

The 1893 *Dictionary of Quotations from Ancient and Modern, English and Foreign Sources* lists a similar proverb, which it claims is of [Chinese](#) provenance: "Better a [diamond](#) with a flaw than a pebble without one."

More recent applications include [Robert Watson-Watt](#) propounding a "cult of the imperfect", which he stated as "Give them the third best to go on with; the second best comes too late, the best never comes";[7] economist [George Stigler](#)'s assertion that "If you never miss a plane, you're spending too much time at the airport";[8][9] and, in