

BE YE PERFECT

By EDWARD YARNOLD

IT would be illuminating to take an opinion poll of religious on one question: 'Do you feel happy about speaking of perfection?' My guess is that those who answered without inhibition would admit that they felt uneasy. Further, I should expect this uneasiness to be something different from a sense of guilt at the sad gap between one's profession of perfection and one's actual attainment. I should attribute it rather to an instinctive awareness that the word perfection is being strained under the weight of a meaning that it is not capable of bearing.

Think how we use the word perfect in ordinary speech. We speak cheerfully enough about a perfect skeleton of a brontosaurus, a perfect reproduction, a word-perfect performance. These uses of the word have something in common: in each instance it is implied that the speaker has in mind a standard, a set of criteria. A perfect skeleton is one with no bones missing, damaged or displaced; a perfect reproduction is one that exhibits all the qualities of the original; a word-perfect repetition is one in which all the words are correct. If the object shows no deviation from the standard, we are prepared to call it perfect.

The point can be illustrated by comparing these two sentences: 'Your french accent is perfect', and, 'Your essay on the value of the study of french is perfect'. The first sentence contains a legitimate use of the word perfect, because there is a fairly precise standard for evaluating a french accent: it must be indistinguishable from the speech of an educated frenchman. But the second misapplies the word, because there are no criteria which can be exactly fulfilled. In the modern educationalists' jargon, an essay question in an examination calls for an open-ended answer: i.e., there is no such thing as the right answer.

Now when we speak of perfection in the religious or moral sense we misuse the word in the same way, for we do not have in our minds a precise blue-print of the ideal religious or christian or human being. It is often said that Christ's life is the standard for all human life. This is of course true, but it is no real help here. When allowance is made for differences of time, situation and character,

when we have discovered to our own satisfaction what our Lord really did and said, when we have then separated what is essential and normative in his life from its accidental setting (and who is qualified to do this?), we are not left with a very precise picture of the perfect man we are trying to become. The basic reason for the lack of clarity is this: life is open-ended; there is no right answer. Therefore there is no precise criterion to be found either in Christ's life or in any other standard; it is a mistake to speak of perfection in this sense.

We make no bones about saying 'So-and-so gave a perfect imitation of General de Gaulle', because we know quite clearly what we expect of an impersonation. But we would never say 'So-and-so gave a perfect imitation of Christ'; not because we know that the imitation of Christ is so difficult that no one can be perfect, nor because we do not know enough about our Lord; but because christian goodness, like an essay, is open-ended. We know some of the faults to be avoided, we know some of the qualities demanded. We can recognise wrong answers, imperfect lives. An individual moral action may be perfect. But it is illegitimate to speak of a perfect life or a perfect man, because it is logically impossible that there can be any sufficiently exact standard.

Now this is not pointless logic-chopping. We may feel, and rightly, that when we speak of religious perfection we know we are using the word in a peculiar sense. We may mean by it complete generosity with God, utter purity of intention. But unfortunately it is not enough simply to know that one is using a word in an unusual sense. If we give a word a new meaning, we may unconsciously allow it to retain the associations that accompanied its normal meaning.

If a word is given a technical meaning different from its everyday meaning, confusion and pseudo-problems will result.¹ (The simplest pseudo-problems we can see through easily. We know that a smile on a face is not the same sort of thing as a leaf on a tree, because the word 'on' is doing two different things in the two phrases. So we are not taken in when someone asks 'Can you have the smile without the cheshire cat?' Children love to create pseudo-problems. They think that any question beginning with 'why' makes sense. But though it makes sense to ask 'Why does the tide come in?' and to follow up with 'Why does the moon pull the water?', sooner or later

¹ The linguistic analysis in which modern philosophers indulge is largely an attempt to bring such pseudo-problems out into the open.

the reply must be either 'Be off with you' or 'That, my boy, is a pseudo-problem'). If we speak of perfection, when we mean love of God, we can easily forget that we are using the word in a special sense, and so can land ourselves in difficulties. These difficulties are pseudo-problems, which would vanish if we restated our thought without misuse of this word perfection. For example, because we are told to aim at perfection, we become too interested in our own progress; our spirituality becomes self-centred. We think of it as something to be developed like muscles or ability to play the piano. The result of this can be a subtle form of selfishness or a feeling that we can grow spirituality by our own efforts. This difficulty would be less insidious if preachers and writers spoke of love of God instead of perfection.

We know what we mean when we say a thing is perfect, except when we speak of a perfect religious or a perfect christian. We know that we do not know what a perfect christian is, but yet we know we have to try to be one; so we become bewildered, discouraged, or perhaps content with mediocrity. All this could be avoided if we spoke of a good christian instead of a perfect one.

Or perhaps we find peace of mind in equating perfection with the keeping of rules. But rules that provide such a precise standard of perfection are generally trivial. Thus we become pharisees, thinking that we will find true fulfilment in exact and literal observance. For we have often heard it said that the model religious is the one who observes the rule perfectly. So the earnest religious may feel obliged to perform each task 'perfectly': to ponder each word in the book he is reading, to remove each speck of dust. We do one job 'perfectly' in the time it would take to do ten jobs intelligently. We dare not undertake work we cannot do 'perfectly'. The result may be scrupulosity and a diminishing of the effectiveness of our service of God.

All this concentration on detail can push humanity, kindness and basic natural virtue out of our lives. Lay people rightly feel no attraction for such a travesty of religious life, and so the number of vocations drops. For such a life seems too difficult and at the same time irrelevant to the modern world and even to the christian spirit.

Finally there is a danger that the word perfection may lead us to think that the ideal is fully attainable. We inevitably come to accept too low or too trivial a view of religious life; we become satisfied with low ideals, or maybe disillusioned. If we spoke instead of religious goodness, we might remember that there is no fixed limit; further growth is always possible.

The logical conclusion would be to banish the word perfection from the christian vocabulary. But in our translations of the New Testament the word perfection occurs frequently in the religious sense. We will try to show, then, that the greek word *teleios*, normally translated 'perfect', has neither the meaning nor the associations that belong to the english word.¹

In the Old Testament the word perfect refers to the completeness of one wholly dedicated to God and free from defect.² When Solomon says 'Let our hearts also be perfect with the Lord our God', the word denotes the completion of a person or object wholly dedicated to God's service, as the second half of the verse indicates: 'that we may walk in his statutes and keep his commandments'.³ The word is also applied to the unblemished paschal lamb,⁴ and to the sinlessness which the israelites are to show by abstaining from witchcraft and other evil practices.⁵ In Moses' orders to Aaron the priest, the word means ordination: 'And you shall not go out from the door of the tent of meeting for seven days, until the days of your ordination are completed, for it will take seven days to ordain you'.⁶

The classical and Old Testament meanings recur in the New Testament. So our Lord, speaking of the purpose of his mission, says: 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to *accomplish* his work'.⁷ It is in the same sense that Paul contrasts faith, which is incomplete and temporary, with our vision of God in the next life, which is complete because face-to-face and eternal: 'For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away'.⁸ Our Lord even speaks of himself as completed by the fulfilment of his mission:

¹ Related to the adjective *teleios* are the verb *teleiō* (I perfect), the nouns *teleiōlēs* and *teleiōsis* (perfection) and the concrete noun *teleiōtēs* (perfecter). I shall speak of perfect or perfection to indicate a greek word belonging to this group. Perfect in classical greek means complete in any sense. It can be used to describe a completed work, an accomplished person (cf *The Compleat Angler*), an effective agent or almighty God, a fully-grown person, a developed virtue, or a consecrated or initiated worshipper. For a fuller discussion of the word, cf G. Delling in Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum neuen Testament* (Stuttgart, 1965), pp 68-88; Liddell-Scott-Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1925-40); W. Arndt and F. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Cambridge, 1957); P. J. de Plessis, *Teleios: the Idea of Perfection in the New Testament* (Kampen, S.A., 1959).

² The Septuagint, the greek version of the Old Testament, uses perfect in this sense to translate two hebrew words *shalem* and *tamim*.

³ 1 Kg 8, 61. This is the Douai translation. The Revised Standard Version (RSV) reads: 'Let your heart, therefore, be wholly true to the Lord our God, walking in his statutes and keeping his commandments'.

⁴ Exod 12, 5.

⁵ Deut 18, 13.

⁶ Lev 8, 33.

⁷ Jn 4, 34.

⁸ 1 Cor 13, 9-10.

'Behold I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course' (literally, 'I am perfected').¹ St Paul uses the same language as he looks forward to the end of his race – the resurrection from the dead: 'Not that I have already obtained this, or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own'.²

Paul also uses the liturgical image of an unblemished sacrifice: he speaks of himself as 'admonishing every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus'.³ Perfect, then, in this context, means sinless: '... to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him'.⁴ Similarly, St James regards a man who can control his tongue as a 'perfect' man, because if he is master of his tongue, he will be master of all his actions.⁵

The word sometimes carries the meaning of complete dedication to God's will. Paul tells his colossians that Epaphras is praying for them 'that you may stand perfect and full in all the will of God'.⁶ So James contrasts the perfect man with the double-minded or unstable.⁷ The perfect are also the mature, the spiritually grown-up. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews tells his readers that they are too childish to penetrate the profundity of his teaching: 'Strong meat is for the perfect'.⁸ The reference is sometimes to the developing unity of all christians in Christ. It is in this corporate sense that Paul uses perfection in his vision of the growing unity of the Church: '... until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ'.⁹ Our Lord uses the same terms in his sacerdotal prayer: 'I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one'.¹⁰ So Paul praises charity as 'the bond of perfection';¹¹ for charity binds christians together so that they form a complete unity.

¹ Lk 13, 32.

² Phil 3, 12.

³ Col 1, 28. This is the Douai translation. RSV has 'mature' instead of 'perfect'. 'Present' is a liturgical word, meaning to offer sacrifice (Rom 12, 1), and used to describe the presentation of Christ in the Temple (Lk 2, 22).

⁴ Col 1, 22.

⁵ Jas 3, 2.

⁶ Col 4, 12. This is the Douai translation. RSV reads 'that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God'.

⁷ Jas 1, 4, 8.

⁸ Heb 5, 14; cf Heb 6, 1. This is the Douai translation. RSV has 'mature'. The same contrast between the mature and spiritual infants is pointed out in 1 Cor 13, 11 and Eph 4, 14.

⁹ Eph 4, 13. Douai reads 'perfect' instead of mature.

¹⁰ Jn 17, 23.

¹¹ Col 3, 14. This is the Douai translation. RSV paraphrases: 'which binds everything together in perfect harmony'.

One of the great themes of St John's first epistle is the perfect love of the christian. Love of God is perfect in a man who keeps God's word.¹ If we are united with God, love is perfect in us, and gives us confidence for the day of judgment.² Fear is incompatible with love that is perfect.³ Such love is perfect, because it is single-minded, practical, showing itself in action.

In first Corinthians, Paul is writing to new christians who have been infected with the fascination for religions that impart secret and redeeming knowledge of mysteries. Paul's preaching, on the contrary, is not of secret wisdom, but of folly – the folly of the cross; though, he adds, 'we speak wisdom among the perfect'.⁴ For there is a sense in which his teaching is secret wisdom; but those who can understand it are not the morally perfect but the initiated, that is, all christians, for they have received the Spirit who enables them to understand: 'We impart this in words not taught by human wisdom, but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit'.⁵

St James also links perfection with steadfast perseverance in faith: 'Let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing'.⁶

It is the Epistle to the Hebrews which rounds out with great originality the christian notion of 'perfection'. Like some Old Testament writers, the author applies the word to the ordination of a priest. Christ is the High Priest, who was perfected, that is, ordained, through suffering.⁷ 'He learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek'.⁸ The old law appoints weak men to be high priests, but God's oath 'appoints a Son who has been made perfect for ever'.⁹ Christ's ordination is no mere decree, but a qualifying, a training in suffering and obedience. His followers share with him this passover from suffering to glory: he is the 'pioneer of their salvation', 'the one who sanctifies', 'the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him'.¹⁰ The christian who is consecrated through a

¹ 1 Jn 2, 5.

² 1 Jn 4, 17.

³ 1 Jn 4, 18 where the word is used twice.

⁴ 1 Cor 2, 6. This is the Douai translation. Revised Standard Version reading, 'mature', is not wholly satisfactory.

⁵ 1 Cor 2, 13.

⁶ Jas 1, 4.

⁷ Heb 2, 10.

⁸ Heb 5, 8-10.

⁹ Heb 7, 28. The words 'for ever', an echo of 'Thou art a priest for ever' (Heb 7, 21 etc) show that perfect in Heb 7, 28 refers to ordination.

¹⁰ Heb 2, 10; 2, 11; 5, 9.

share in Christ's ordination by suffering is perfect: 'for by a single offering he has perfected (i.e. consecrated) for all time those who are sanctified'.¹ The christian's share in Christ's priestly consecration includes the right to 'draw near to God through him'.² In the Old Testament, this privilege of access to God belongs only to priests:³ the law did not provide consecration and access to God.⁴ Even the levitical priesthood did not provide true consecration.⁵ The Old Testament sacrifices cannot make worthy of access to God the conscience of the worshipper or consecrate those who draw near.⁶

Christ's perfection, that is consecration, destines him to glory at the Father's right hand in the true Holy of Holies. 'When Christ appeared as a high priest . . . he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption'.⁷ Redemption means that his destination is ours also. He is the 'pioneer (trail-breaker) of their salvation',⁸ 'the pioneer and perfecter (i.e. he takes us to our destination) of our faith'.⁹ We can run with perseverance to our goal¹⁰ in the knowledge that he has already reached his by way of the cross and is now with his Father.¹¹ This our hope is like an anchor, sure and steadfast; and it can enter through the curtain into the Holy of Holies, 'where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest for ever'.¹²

The saints of the Old Testament were also made perfect:¹³ that is, reached their destination through enduring suffering in faith. They are our 'cloud of witnesses'¹⁴ and cheer us on as we run our race in our turn.

In the heavenly liturgy, the tent through which our Lord reached the Holy of Holies is 'greater and more perfect'.¹⁵ The Old Testament liturgy is only 'a copy and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary'.¹⁶ The heavenly liturgy which our high priest celebrates for us is more perfect because it is archetypal.¹⁷

¹ Heb 10, 14.

² Heb 7, 25.

³ Num 8, 19.

⁴ 'The law made nothing perfect'. Heb 7, 19.

⁵ Heb 7, 11.

⁶ Heb 9, 9; 10, 1. The verb in both cases is 'perfect'.

⁷ Heb 9, 11-12.

⁸ Heb 2, 10.

⁹ Heb 12, 2.

¹⁰ We have already seen that the passive verb 'to be perfected' carries the notion of reaching one's goal in Phil 3, 12 and Lk 13, 32.

¹¹ Heb 12, 1-2.

¹² Heb 6, 20. Note that Christ's ordination as priest is completed only after the ascension.

¹³ Heb 11, 40; 12, 23.

¹⁴ Heb 12, 1.

¹⁵ Heb 9, 11.

¹⁶ Heb 8, 5; cf Heb 9, 23.

¹⁷ This platonic line of thought is an instance of the affinity between Hebrews and Philo. The use of the pronoun themselves to designate heavenly forms is a borrowing from Plato's technical vocabulary. Heb 9, 23.

Finally, we must consider the words of our Lord recorded in Matthew, from which the title of this article is taken: 'Be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect'. They occur at the end of the section of the sermon on the mount, in which our Lord shows how his moral teaching fulfils the law and the prophets.¹ It seems clear that our Lord's recommendation does not concern the entire section, but only his exhortation to love our enemies as well as our friends.² Consequently, as perfection refers to love that is not confined to a particular group, the sense of complete or without restriction seems to fit the word best: your love, our Lord will then be saying, must be universal like your Father's.³

St Matthew's other use of the word occurs in the episode of the rich young man who tells our Lord that he has observed the commandments fully, and asks 'What do I still lack?'⁴ Jesus replies: 'If you would be perfect, go sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me'. The phrase 'if you would be perfect' is not found in the parallel passages of St Mark and St Luke, which merely say 'You (still) lack one thing'.⁵ The word in Matthew therefore means complete: our Lord is saying: 'If you want to do the one thing that is lacking to you, you must get rid of your money'. He is not saying: 'If you want to belong to an elite in a state of religious perfection superior to ordinary christians'. In other words, the passage does not offer a general counsel for all who are generous enough to observe it, but is simply a piece of particular advice for the individual spiritual state of this young man: his only fault is that he loves his money too much.

Again St Matthew no doubt has more than one meaning of perfect in mind; the word may also express here total devotion to God's

¹ Mt 5, 17 ff.

² Mt 5, 43-47; verse 48 is simply a clearer restatement of the words in verse 45, 'so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven', which are connected only with the love of enemies.

³ We must note that Mt 5, 48 is an adaptation of Lev 19, 2: 'You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy'. The connection between these chapters of Mt and Lev is proved by Mt 5, 43 which quotes from Lev 19, 18: 'You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy'. But why does Mt change Lev's holy into perfect? Possibly with an eye on Deut 18, 13: unlike sorcerers etc., 'You shall be blameless (perfect in the Septuagint version) before the Lord your God'. If this conjecture is correct, Mt joins together two meanings of perfect: without restriction and blameless. St Luke also records our Lord as citing Lev 19, 2 again in the context of love of enemies (Lk 6, 36); but here the word used is merciful instead of holy: 'Be merciful even as your Father is merciful'. Clearly St Luke thought that our Lord applied the text in Leviticus to universal love.

⁴ Mt 19, 20.

⁵ Mk 10, 21; Lk 18, 22.

will, as often in the Old Testament. The young man's riches are preventing him from giving his whole heart to God.

From this brief examination of the meaning of the words perfect and perfection in holy scripture, we may fairly conclude that the english words are not really suitable to describe christian goodness. The traditional use of the word perfect to translate *teleios* in the New Testament is never accurate, at least when the word is applied to a person. Holy scripture, when speaking of the perfection of the christian life, means a life so free from fault that it can be offered to God as a sacrifice; in the positive sense, it means maturity and that same single-minded obedience – truly loving obedience – to God which Christ himself showed. The christian spirit is thus characterised by faith and obedience; it demands universal love; it links christians together in Christ. It involves following him on his journey through painful obedience to his Father's side and so sharing in his priesthood. There are, of course, many other words in the vocabulary of the New Testament which express the total self-giving which a true christian life demands. But it is hardly an exaggeration to say that the words so often mistranslated by perfect or perfection include in their meaning all the essential New Testament teaching on the christian vocation.