

PURPOSE, NOT PERFECTION

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Childhood trips to piano lessons and choir rehearsals often brought me to South Park Boulevard, an attractive residential street in one of the oldest and wealthiest parts of Cleveland. Trips down this road inevitably conjured images of the perfect life; that is, the only kind of life that is fit to be lived within the beautiful estates that line either side of such a quaint and peaceful place. Beyond the monumental oak trees that cloak the street in green tinted shade, the perfectly manicured lawns, dotted with nothing but designer rose bushes and skillfully laid marble stone landscaping, there must reside the perfect couple, with perfect children, surrounded in perfect happiness.

Growing up, this image served as my motivation to perform academically and to seek out opportunities to rise socially. I saw perfection and achievement as necessary to a full and rewarding life, which resulted in a very self-centered and unforgiving set of values.

It wasn't until I stepped foot on Duke's campus that I found these values challenged. In typical overconfident first-year fashion, I enrolled in the hardest classes I could find, and signed up for more student groups than three of me could handle. Then, to the astonishment of my previously perfect self, I failed. I quickly discovered my utter distaste for engineering and embarrassing incompetence in organic chemistry. Having previously defined my sense of self worth in terms of my academic performance, my worldview was thoroughly shaken and required redefinition.

It was around this time of angst and self-loathing that an upper class friend suggested I try a philosophy class. Ancient and Modern Ethical Theory was taught by a professor known to wear vests in the color of traffic cones and to otherwise act crazy to prevent students from dozing off in his favorite 8:30 AM time slot.

Tentative but curious, I approached my very first philosophy papers as I did book reports in middle school. "Confucius lived from 551-479 BCE and was an important thinker in Chinese history," said the first line of my response to a prompt that asked for students to explicate "the role of li or xiao in bringing about ren and zhi."

My professor's feedback, scrawled in barely legible handwriting, suggested that I try getting into the "nitty gritty" of things. He wasn't looking for a perfect paper, safe and accurate in its assertions. It took me a while to understand. Meanwhile, I continued to be frustrated in class as I looked long and hard for the "right" answers to questions that unfortunately didn't come with an answer key conveniently printed in index b.

Philosophy, and life, it slowly dawned on me, is not meant to be lived perfectly. It is instead meant to be questioned, stretched, and examined, carefully, courageously. The former biomedical engineer who strove for perfection became a philosopher in training who strove merely for understanding. Little did I know that this in itself would be such a tall order. In the process of striving, I've been

able to view my interests from a grittier, real-world perspective. With South Park Boulevard many miles away, I ventured into Durham and tutored underperforming fourth graders in math and reading. Duke afforded me the opportunity to travel to India, where I witnessed inequality in all its heartbreaking forms. During a summer spent studying abroad at Oxford University, I explored the ethics of gene patenting and stem cell research. Now, in my senior year, I am investigating the historical and contemporary role of paternalism in medical decision-making as the topic for my honors thesis.

Four years later, I have learned the extent of my ignorance, and how much I have yet to understand. I have also become a firm believer in the ability of a liberal arts education to instill in students a set of values that is firm, yet flexible. Before being forced outside of my various established comfort zones, I blindly pursued perfection because I had never been challenged to view the world from outside my own perspective. But perfection is neither intellectually meaningful, nor morally purposeful. In being challenged to step outside of my self-centered goals to attain perfection, I gleaned a new-found sense of purpose to engage and contribute to the world around me. In discarding perfection, we reject the rigidity of an uncompromising life, and open our lives to the possibility that imperfections can be beautiful and that they, though sometimes painfully and heartbreakingly, remind us that we are alive.