



The Intellectual Standard

Volume 2 | Issue 1

Article 5

2012

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Recommended Citation

Christison, Michael (2012) "Faulty Phrases: "There Is No Such Thing As Perfection", " *The Intellectual Standard*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/tis/vol2/iss1/5>

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October 2012

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Faulty Phrases: “There Is No Such Thing As Perfection”

Michael Christison

In regard to this saying, one of the most notable references can be found in the movie *Tron: Legacy*. Although not a direct quote, the character Kevin Flynn, played by Jeff Bridges, communicates a very similar message to the public: “The thing about perfection is that it’s unknowable. It’s impossible, but it’s also right in front of us all the time.” This stance from Flynn, or rather the scriptwriters, epitomizes the commonplace idea that I wish to critically examine.

“There is no such thing as perfection” could have several different interpretations. The most literal of which would be the notion that perfection simply *does not* exist. That is, any concept that “perfection” denotes does not exist. I think this would be a difficult principle to stand behind. Of course, the concept denoted by “perfection” would not be seen to *physically* exist. It is not a physical object like a lamp or a mailbox. However, it does appear to be an intelligible concept, and therefore, it exists in the sense that we are actually able to use it intelligibly. It exists in the sense that *addition* and *subtraction* exist.

Encarta defines perfection as, “the quality of something that is as good or suitable as it *can* possibly be.” Anyone who has received a ten out of ten on a multiple-choice quiz or one-hundred percent on a math test understands that he or she has achieved a perfect score. Indeed, any person who has taken a quiz or test at all should be able understand that such a perfect score is at least possible and that there is such a thing.

The perspective from Flynn appears to be that perfection is unknowable and that it is impossible to achieve. Yet, despite the assumption that perfection is unknowable, it can be known that perfection is always right in front of us. This is not unlike the typical claim: perfection is unattainable, but things like art and music are the closest we can get to said perfection. Putting aside the apparent contradiction in Flynn’s logic, my immediate reaction to assertions of this sort is to say that they are devoid of a clear meaning. There is no definition of “perfection” here. It must be unknowable if there are no criteria for knowing it. I would expect the retort

to be something like, “But that is the point!” Touché, imaginary opponent. However, the problem is that we are now forced into a position that represents “perfection” as a completely unintelligible term, a position that does not seem to hold, as I have shown. What is the discrepancy here?

The key to sorting out this confusion is to realize that people who make claims similar to that of the writers of *Tron: Legacy* are speaking from within an implicit context. However, because the context is not obvious, it is up to others to infer what the context is. My educated guess would be that the writers are referring to perfection in *society* perhaps. When viewed through this lens, what Flynn says is slightly less vague. It would follow that a *perfect society* is unknowable and impossible, rather than perfection alone being unknowable and impossible. That such a thing is right in front of us is another matter. The issue at hand is that when the parallel phrase, “There is no such thing as perfection,” is used in everyday conversation, there is no context that can be inferred. This is because there is often no context that is communicated.

The only way to comprehend perfection at all is to use it within some context—some framework of understanding. I must attempt to relate perfection *to something* before I talk about whether or not it is an intelligible claim. For instance, there may be such a thing as a perfect mattress. I would be inclined to disagree with such an open-ended and subjective proposition. However, I would contend that it may be possible to create a perfect *Lebeda* mattress over at the *Lebeda* factory given that it is within the range of correct design specifications.

To say that, “There is no such thing as perfection,” leaves much to be desired. I think a more accurate statement would be something like this: “The situations in which we sometimes believe perfection to be possible are often not situations in which it is possible.” This is what I believe to be the proper message that people intend to communicate. The word “perfection” can only be applied to that which it can be applied, as to be determined by the way it is defined and the context in which it is used. To leave the saying in its common form is confusing. Taken literally, it is false. In order to avoid further miscommunication, an effective course of action would be to come up with a better saying, one that is hopefully less verbose than my suggestion.