

Imperfection Worldview

The imperfection worldview is nothing fancy, it's just reality: seeing and understanding how life is evolving. A mutation is an imperfection, a "mistake" or a "newtake," a little genetic discrepancy or difference-that-makes-a-difference, a slight shift that moves life in a slightly different direction. This is how creatures evolve, by genetic mutations that are more or less adaptive to ecological contexts. Adaptation is amazingly complicated because one gene or a few genes can help a creature resist one disease while making it vulnerable to another, e.g. too many sickle cells gives you deadly anemia, the right amount of sickle cells gives resistance to deadly malaria. A mutation makes one bat slightly different from another bat and before you know it there are 932 species of bat that don't interbreed with each other, each adapted ecologically to a different kind of batty business. When something in the genetic blueprint or plan of each creature shifts, that change will be tested over generations and be found useful or not useful, adaptive or nonadaptive to circumstances. What starts out as accumulating imperfections or deviations from "the plan" gradually creates new creatures that are temporarily well-adapted or perfect in their way until more imperfections push them in new directions. This is all very complicated to understand but the basic idea is that imperfections give us species diversity and this very diversity of creatures, so many different varieties of "collected and tested over time gene pools" is our biggest insurance of continued human existence. You should pray each night that one or more species of bats will like to eat the mosquitoes that spread West Nile Virus, and pray each morning that the Mayor of New York will not poison the atmosphere of all living creatures with toxins just to get at a few mosquitoes that the bats could easily have eaten if we were spending our money on well-situated bat houses and wetlands protection.

This imperfection as mutation as adaptation as human protection works beautifully in biology and in jazz or blues. At the socio-cultural level, great jazz rhythm sections evolve when the imperfections or "Participatory Discrepancies" of a bassist adapt to the PDs of a drummer and a triangular mutual adaptation takes place (in a "pocket" or "niche") between those two and a pianist or guitarist who may or may not be "the pendulum player" who acts as "referee" when it comes to the boxing match or as "chef" when it comes to making the mango chutney. From an imperfection worldview, improvised musicking like jazz can continue to evolve new grooves, new ecologies, new styles of musicking while perfect or serious music can only devolve into aleatory or serial or new formulas for failure to communicate because composers and conductors and other power-over people are usually trying to keep PDs and grooves to the perfect minimum necessary for dutiful performance proficiency.

The imperfection worldview must be defended in books because perfectionists are on the offensive everywhere. Just like composers and conductors would like to control every single note, biologists want to perfect plants and animals by engineering their genes. Chief Executive Officers want to perfect their plans for increased profits. Hollywood and media offer us "the beautiful people," the perfect people, whose sudden imperfections can only further fuel endless gossip and sales of tabloids at the checkout

counters. There are endless games of perfection and correcting imperfection being played out before us (how many times has Oprah lost or gained weight?) that keep us bemused, distracted, puzzling, buying fixes for problems that only exist because we have been persuaded to believe in purity, perfection, perfectionism, only to suffer from addictions to perfection.

When you come right down to it, at the end of the proverbial day, at the bottom line, people are either pro-Plato, and advocating perfection, forms, ideas, ideals, the text, the score, transcendental truths, “unified theories” of universal this and that. . . . or they are anti-Plato “dogs”¹, anti-perfection and advocating for funk, the necessary slippage, the immanent mud, the down and dirty discrepancies, the mutations and imperfections of grooving. If you are one of the pro-Plato people, that's another reason to drop this book. We preach only to the converted here. We don't need you fussy Platonists as critics or as a witnesses right this minute. When you drop the book and it hits the surface –thud -- one of us groove mavens will make of that thud a “funky One” by adding another beat/thud in just the ‘wrong’ place with just the ‘wrong’ texture so that a “baaad” sequence will be established soooooo mightily that the third beat will feel inevitable, satisfactual, instantgratificational, proving Lord Buckley's hypothesis that there is, in fact, “rhythm in chutney.” In chutney? Especially in mango chutney, but in all salsas and sauces where diverse flavors and palates meet and don't quite merge messily.

Did Plato try to get us out of the cave of ignorance? Or did he put us there with his Perfect Chair? One way to think of the Perfect Chair, or the perfect anything, the idea of it, the ideal form, is that this was the first and fatal advertisement. The first inferiority message. You don't have The Best Chair, yet. Just like you don't have The Sweetest Smelling Armpit, yet. If you can tell the pro-Plato people from the anti-Plato types by whether or not they use deodorant, then the Platonists are winning big time, at least here in the fear-of-funk USA. Probably deodorant use is not the best diagnostic; after all, it's possible to smell sweet and still keep the beat. I would like people to adopt the "imperfection worldview" because from this perspective it is easier to smile hopefully when kids make mistakes, and to smile again when these 'mistakes' turn out to be original, inviting participation, encouraging the compensating errors of groove.

Pat Campbell:

Music contests and festivals are the rage, and some school kids are drawn to school music for its competitive activities. All well and good? Should we be striving for performance to perfection, or performance as participation? We might be more sane to choose the latter, which might open the doors wider for music as pleasure, as social cohesion, as community spirit. Music without the cold edge seems about right in schools, “we” music rather than “me” music, the sort of musicmaking activity that leads to love (of more music and of the friends who make it) rather than obsession. Yet our society is

¹ The "dogs" who took Socrates' teachings in the anti-Platonic direction – Antisthenes, Diogenes, Crates and Hipparchia, the many street philosophers who followed their teachings for over eight centuries from 4th century BC to 4th century AD – are only recently being rediscovered and reinterpreted as the first diggers, beatniks, hippies, drop outs from class society and empire building. See *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy* edited by R. Bracht Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Caze.

driven to compete rather than to live the communal give-and-take alternative. Does competition make better performers? Does it build character? Is it the manifestation of a highly developed human way? If not, why are we so driven? Competition may be inevitable, what with the nature of interscholastic festivals, but we must take care not to identify and reward the select few when all who participate are praiseworthy. Or perhaps we could we have competitions that reward the strangest "imperfections," the richest "participatory discrepancies" and most danceable "grooves?"

* What are the benefits and doubts, strengths and worries, concerning competitions? From research articles to philosophical position papers, there is a wide array of literature on the subject to peruse. See James Austin's Competition: Is music education the loser? (Music Educators Journal 76:6, 1990, 21-25), Austin's The effect of music contest format on self-concept, motivation, achievement and attitude of elementary band students (Journal of Research in Music Education 36, 1988, 95-107), R. E. Miller's A dysfunctional culture: Competition in music (Music Educators Journal 81, November 1994, 20-33), and Michael W. Apple's Competition, knowledge, and the loss of educational vision (Philosophy of Music Education Review 11, Spring 2003, 3-22).