

## The Enemy of the Good

February 26, 2007

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Two years ago, a colleague called to satisfy his curiosity about a small matter.

He began: “You used the saying ‘The perfect is the enemy of the good’ when we were talking a few days ago. After that, I heard Meg Whitman use it in a meeting. Do you happen to know what the source of it is?”

I confessed that I didn’t, but committed to find out. After mild argument with my colleague -- who, to give fuller disclosure, was my boss’s boss -- over his not wanting to cause me extra work on a trivial thing, I committed to him that I would find out who first stated this clearly correct observation. It would be a pleasure, not a chore, since my own curiosity was now up.

And, after all, this should have been a simple matter. All human knowledge, or at least great whacking chunks of it, is literally at fingertips’ reach. Today, I went to repeat my search of two years ago by starting started to Google “The perfect is the enemy of the good.” This time, Google “suggested” the phrase I was looking for after I had typed only “the perfect is ....” The first hit was to Wikipedia, that open-posting web encyclopedia. If memory serves, Wikipedia didn’t exist when I first went looking for the saying’s author two years ago.

Today, Wikipedia sends me to its article on Voltaire, and says that “The best is the enemy of the good”, as “*Le mieux est l’ennemi du bien*” is from his *La Béguéule* of 1772. Unhelpfully, Wikipedia didn’t reveal what sort of work *La Béguéule* is. Since dictionary.com didn’t offer a translation of “*La Béguéule*,” I resorted to a paperback French-English dictionary with a last copyright date of 1971. This dictionary booted up instantly, did not chide me for mistyping, and, without one error message or pop-up of any kind, informed me that the title means “the prude.”

Tantalizingly, the Wikipedia article on Voltaire had also asserted that “This quotation also appears in Italian (*Il meglio è l’inimico del bene*) in the *Questions sur l’Encyclopédie* article, “Dramatic Art” (1764).” I’m left to assume that this work is also Voltaire’s, but get no clue of why Voltaire used the proverb in Italian, in an article on dramatic art.

I emailed an Italian colleague, now living in Geneva, asking whether Voltaire had cribbed an old Italian saying. His internet searching of Italian sites revealed an abundance of Italian sayings on similar themes, including not only “the better is the enemy of the good,” but also

*Chi ha bene e va in cerca di meglio, trova il peggio.* (Who has the good and looks for the better will find the worse.)

*Dal bene viene il meglio, e dal meglio il peggio.* (From good comes better, from better comes worse.)

*Dove il cattivo è meglio, il meglio è nulla.* (If the bad is better, the better is nothing.)

*L'uomo non ha peggior nemico del meglio.* (The better is man's worst enemy.)

*Non bisogna voler fare le cose troppo bene.* (One should not look for perfection.)

*Quando una cosa sta bene che basta, lasciala star perché si guasta.* (When something is good enough, leave it alone or it will get bad.)

Clearly, I need to move to Italy. Any country that has seven proverbial variations on “leave well enough alone” is practically perfect.

But, back to the quest for the source -- sadly, my Italian friend's current location in Geneva didn't allow print-based research on the source of the saying “The better is the enemy of the good,” and he didn't offer any source for the Italian version.

But here is something I did learn: research the same simple question on the internet after two years' time, and you can measure in a little way the progress of the organization of human knowledge. If memory serves, my first attempt to find the author of the saying discovered attributions to George Patton, Napoleon, von Clausewitz, Plato, Moliere, and Voltaire. There were probably others I've forgotten. On the web today, Voltaire is ahead of the pack by giga-miles – no doubt since Wikipedia is often the hit first shown in Google searches.

The saying itself has become so current that it's spawned an internet mirror-image, namely, the saying, “The good is the enemy of the perfect.” There is passionate web debate over whether the older saying or the newer packs more truth. Logically, it doesn't seem like a close case. The goal of perfection can often kill even the attempt at the good. The goal of the good kills the attempt at perfection only when it's the goal of

the “good enough.” And “good enough” is by definition “good enough.” So, the right modern proverb would be “The good enough is the enemy of the needlessly perfect,” which as one ages, seems to be not a bad thing to be an enemy to.

Today’s research also reveals that “The Perfect is the Enemy of the Good” is the title of a recording by the heavy-metal band “Burnt by the Sun.” The Web favors me with the knowledge that, according to Barry Dejasu of Rehoboth, Massachusetts, this album is “not so perfect ...and not really all that good, either.” This observation could be fodder for a new Internet debate: on the relationship between the imperfect and the mediocre – Are they friends, enemies, or Swisslike neutrals?

That’s a debate that, in essence, goes to the medium itself. On the internet, everything is available, and nothing is canonical. Is the wildly imperfect the enemy of the good? We’ll see. The traditional, optimistic American view is that “truth will emerge in the marketplace of ideas.” The pessimistic view is that we’ve created epistemological entropy. Similar warnings, we should note, were attached to translating Christian scripture into the commoners’ language, to public education, and to universal literacy. What evolves from the Web’s hot dilute soup of electrons will be interesting to watch.

But now for a confession. Having struck out in finding the definitive source of “The perfect is the enemy of the good” in my first web searches two years back, I asked my next-door office neighbor, a Sorbonne-educated lawyer, whether Voltaire was the coiner. He passed the question to a supposedly scholarly friend in France, who attributed it to Voltaire’s contemporary, Montesquieu. A little more internet searching on my own located a Parisian company selling T-shirts and mugs bearing famous quotes, including “*Le mieux est l’ennemi mortelle du bien*,” (“The perfect is the mortal enemy of the good.”) The T-shirts authoritatively attributed this to Montesquieu. I ordered four. One for me, one for the colleague who helped, one for the colleague who asked, and one for that colleague to give to Meg Whitman.

Meg Whitman, by the way, is the CEO of eBay, the internet auction site. Ebay is a true modern philosopher’s stone, turning lead into gold, or trash into cash, by catering to our desires not only to consume, but to compete in consuming. Clearly, the internet is not the enemy of the goods. I hope I haven’t caused an internet CEO to wear a T-shirt

with a false attribution, and lay the gauntlet down to the Club to find the true source of this proverb, in order to shine some *lux* on the proverb's undeniable *veritas*.