

## Why Be Virtuous?

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*Reality’s Fugue* is a book about reconciling worldviews in philosophy, religion, and science. I’d like to talk briefly about the importance of this book’s subject matter in the context of how people treat others whom they think of as alien, as different from themselves.

I’m sure you have all heard about and are troubled by the increase in the number of hate crimes and hate groups over the last decade and a half, an increase that has accelerated since the last presidential election. This country and much of the world seems to be caught up in a wave of intolerance of all that seems alien or foreign or different.

But here is a question for you.

*Why* should we be tolerant of others? *Why not* be a neo-Nazi or a Knight of the Ku Klux Klan? Why not try to exterminate those you don’t like if it gives meaning to your life? Put another way, why shouldn’t life (and politics) be thoroughly Darwinian — survival of the fittest? Or perhaps a sporting contest where the winner gets the trophy and the loser gets nothing?

I expect this question has troubled a number of you; it certainly has troubled me.

I received my doctorate from the Temple University Religion Department. One of the advantages of learning philosophy in a religion department as opposed to a philosophy department is that we learned not only Western philosophy but also Asian philosophy. And one of the things that quickly becomes clear in such a course of study is that people around the earth see the world very differently than we do.

One of the scholarly values we had to bring to our academic efforts to understand these other worldviews is a tolerance for philosophical views that are different from our own. If one is to avoid intellectual bias, one needs to be agnostic in these matters. One needs to find the validity in all these different perspectives as far as possible.

It may seem obvious to you that we had to approach our research in a dispassionate, objective fashion; however, we ran into a difficult problem. What were we to do with worldviews like those of Hitler or Stalin or Pol Pot? Surely there must be a difference between “good” and “bad” worldviews, but how were we to judge? What should be our criteria when *any* criteria seem to be just a way of supporting one view over another?

As you can see, we’re now back to my original question: why isn’t one’s group’s approach to life as good as any other if it gives participants meaning and purpose?

So how do we answer this question?

One place we can look for answers is in the philosophies supporting various world religions. And in fact these philosophies tend to be fairly consistent in their answers. In Asian religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, virtue is required for enlightenment and, hence, for fulfillment. In Western monotheism, virtue brings us closer to God and, again, to fulfillment. By “virtue,” what religious scriptures almost universally teach is, in part, compassion for others and making the interests of others one’s own interests. (This is, I might emphasize, also true of the Qur’an.)

But in the Western world today, dominated as it is by science’s perspective on reality, it’s difficult to understand how religions justify such answers. What is “God,” anyway? What is “enlightenment”? And, in any case, religions themselves have different views on the nature of reality. Buddhists, for example, don’t believe in an overarching creator God. Nor do they believe that we are each, in our true nature, an enduring person or “soul.”

In *Reality’s Fugue*, I’ve proposed that these competing accounts of reality that justify virtue can be understood as different themes in a larger composition. Much like a fugue in music, reality is composed of many very different voices, and the “virtue” of any single voice derives from the part it plays within the whole.