

Why Be Virtuous? Reprised as Why Study Scripture?

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Hello everyone.. I'm Samuel Brainard. It's an honor to visit your Torah study group today.

My background is philosophy and world religions. I've taught at Rutgers and Temple Universities, and I have a new book out called *Reality's Fugue: Reconciling Worldviews In Philosophy, Religion, and Science* that is published by Pennsylvania State University Press. We can talk more about the book later if you'd like; however, the subject today concerns Genesis.

All or at least most of you have been given some pages from David Brooks' book, *Road to Character*, to read for our discussion. This excerpt looks at the two descriptions of Adam in Genesis. I understand that Abraham proposed this topic as a way into a question raised by a member of this Torah group as to the value of studying scripture.

Before we begin, I'd like to make some introductory remarks on this subject of the importance of studying scripture.

Brooks' book is a response to what he sees as a moral climate that has become out of balance, a turn toward self-interest and tribalism at the expense of moral values that encompass the interests of others. Like Brooks, I find this country and much of the world caught up in a wave of intolerance of all that is alien or foreign or different. Particularly troubling to me has been 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

But here is a question for you, one that I think goes to the heart of Brooks' book.

Why should we be tolerant of others? *Why not* oppose ideas if we find them inconvenient or distasteful? Why not go even further and become 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. Regardless of people’s dreadful record of following this teaching, this “Golden Rule” appears in various forms in all major world religions.

Nevertheless, 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.” Observations like these undermine the beliefs about reality that support these religions. And once their philosophical underpinnings for fulfillment are stripped away, the rationale for virtuous behavior falls away as well leaving us with only the pragmatics of behavior. Action becomes guided not by a moral code but by what is useful to us. Such a justification for virtue cuts out the heart of the Golden Rule, which now becomes “Do unto others as best serves oneself.”

If we are to accept religions’ views of virtue, then we need a better justification for their underlying philosophies. Where might we find such justification? Put another way, what is the Torah trying to tell us about who we are that transcends any one religion or culture or story about creation? What is it about the Torah here that is timeless, that is written for all ages and all peoples?

It is in this context that I’d like to turn now to Adam I and Adam II. Adam I is ourselves as the center of the universe. To the extent this worldview encompasses those who see the world similarly, it is also the view of the tribe. It’s approach to life is pragmatic. What is good is what satisfies that tribe’s desires; what is bad is what thwarts those desires. Adam II is the universal view, the third-person view, the view of what is so for all — of a truth and wisdom that transcends any one group. It is, however, also the worldview that, in Genesis, got us kicked out of the Garden.

At the end of Brooks’ book he has a “Humility Code.” Brooks’ first proposition in his Humility Code is that “We don’t live for happiness; we live for holiness.”

The question I’d like to ask Diana and Abraham to begin the discussion is: Why should we believe that we live for holiness and not happiness? And particularly for us here today: How might the two Adams in Genesis give us some insight into this matter?

SOME DISCUSSION TOPICS:

- Smith’s story of “You are that...”
- Wisdom ← third-person view
- We know from science that the world we perceive around us is created by our brains; it is not “out there” but in our minds. In other words, this world that we perceive ourselves sharing is a shared world we ourselves create and some deep level of our being.
- Hinduism 5 sheaths.
- Martin Buber: “I and Thou” versus “I and it”. (But how do we justify this concept of who we are fundamentally?)
- First-person versus third-person views. (But how are we also the third-person view?)
- LIMITS OF TOLERANCE: “Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them...” (Karl Popper in *The Open Society*). **Much of Europe used this logic to claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant. Accordingly, Nazi paraphernalia and Holocaust Denialism are outlawed in otherwise open societies like Germany and France.**

REALITY’S FUGUE IS ABOUT the philosophies that underlie major world religions and science and how certain of the central differences among them trace back to a single puzzle that humanity has been struggling with in its various expressions since the beginning of philosophy.