

You Don't Get Credit for the Moral Advances of Others

Oh, you're anti-racism, hmm? You believe women should have equal rights? You're against war? You think Nazis are bad?

Good.

But that belief (and repeating it on social media, etc) doesn't make you a hero. Being "more enlightened" than your ancestors in these ways doesn't actually make you smarter or wiser.

All of these beliefs are good, of course. But once a belief is mainstream (as these examples are), once it's accepted, you don't get to call yourself "good" for holding it. If you're learning that belief in school, church, and home growing up, you can be sure that other people did the hard work for that belief.

Those people – the people who deserve credit for defeating segregationism or Nazism, for instance – lived before us, and they are gone or passing now. They deserve the credit, though I doubt they would accept as much as you do. They stood against evil when it was unpopular, psychologically uncomfortable, and physically dangerous to do so.

What made them so good was not just that they held the right beliefs when no one else did, but that they had virtue in concert with those beliefs. They spoke the truth courageously at risk to themselves, they put their lives on the line, and they even showed compassion to enemies. They were *good* in a way that requires much more than mental orthodoxy.

Virtue is much, much harder to acquire, and it will probably not bring you accolades when you first begin to follow it. But the feeling of growth and meaning from living virtuously is much realer than the feeling of pride in having better beliefs than your ancestors.

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