

What are Principles For?



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So much has changed in my life since I became an adult all those many years ago, I’ve had a lot of experience with the concept of “principles.” I thought I’d put down my thoughts on what principles are and what they’re for. Here goes.

Principles

Principles are “fundamental truths or propositions that serve as a foundation for a system of belief or behavior or for a chain of reasoning.” Natural laws, like the law of gravity (which we still don’t understand), are a type of principle. We observe and experiment to determine what these principles are and how they effect other things. They are fundamental truths of our universe. There are other types of principles. When someone decides to live according to a set of propositions, such as “it is wrong to steal” or “it is wrong to deceive,” those are also a type of principle.

Principles are not necessarily true for everyone all of the time. Some principles are, such as the law of gravity, but many are not. This is one difference between rules and principles. A rule might be “no swimming for one hour after you eat,” whereas the principle in the same context is “swimming right after you eat a big meal may cause physical discomfort.” The rule must be obeyed, or leave, while the principle needs simply be acknowledged in order to serve as guidance for the future.

Purpose

I think that the overriding purpose of principles is to help us understand the proper means for our desired ends. If we desire to fly, we must understand the effects of gravity. If we desire to move from point A to point B very quickly, we must understand not only the principles of locomotion, but also the principles behind building a fast car or train. The progress of science is the increase of our understanding of principles. As it is with natural law, so it is with propositions.

We hear about different principles, and then we wonder if allowing them to guide us will get us to where we want to be. Maybe they will, or maybe they won't. They come in all different shapes and sizes and are either the proper means for our desired ends, or not. Take what I write about all the time, *the voluntary principle*. This principle states that all human relations should happen voluntarily, by mutual consent, or not at all. Of course, like all principles, it's often written in shorthand and naturally begs the question: why? I've written extensively in answer to the question (on philosophy and ethics). So have others.

Formulated principles like this are often much more than they seem, and require a lot of study by those espousing the principle in order to fully understand it. Only once its fully understood can we determine if its right for us. Principles like these aren't compatible with everyone's desired ends, which themselves are chosen on the basis of people's values. To say that others *must* follow a given principle is irrational, in my opinion. While we may advise that certain principles be followed if one's desired ends are such and such, to prescribe principles without consideration of one's freely chosen ends is to give instruction where none is required. It simply won't be heard, and one doing so is likely to be written off as a busybody or a moralizer.

Final Thoughts

I've heard people attack certain principles as "false" and what not, without giving any consideration to the reasons behind using them. It drives me crazy. Principles are not necessarily always true or always applicable to everyone all of the time, as I said, but that doesn't automatically make them "false." It only makes them the wrong tools for the chosen job. We would all do well to find the right tools, get the job done, and move on to the next.

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