

Thoughts on the Principles by Which We Live

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Ladies and Gentlemen:

Recently, I saw a film. A woman was a candidate for an important government job in United States and a committee was asking her questions; this was evidently customary in such a case. Photographs came up of this woman, taken some twenty years before. In them, she was naked and at an orgy. She was asked repeatedly to explain the pictures, but she wouldn't, because she felt her private life should be kept out of public; because she strongly felt the committee had no business asking those questions.

Later, it is revealed ? though only to the cinema audience, not the committee -- that the photos were fake, that it wasn't her in them at all, and that she could easily have proven that. Why didn't she save herself a lot of trouble and defend herself right at the start? Why didn't she just tell the committee that the pictures were fake? "Because", she says, "they just had no business asking that. One can't only act on one's principles when it's advantageous."

The film went on for a while after that but my mind stopped there. Would I have done the same, I asked myself. Would you have done the same, I ask you. You don't need to tell me whether you would have, but it's worth thinking about. I don't think I would have.

All in all, principles are a funny little thing. It's probably perfectly possible, even common, to live one's life without any. Often, you only really make important decisions about right and wrong once you actually face a difficult situation. You may live your life thinking that lying, for example, is wrong, but you still face situations where you lie all the same ? it may be convenient, it may be done to save someone's feelings; it may, indeed, be justified.

But supposing you have a principle. Supposing you have a principle not to lie. Really, a principle. Then it doesn't matter whether you or anyone else will suffer from your telling the truth; you have no other choice, you cannot lie. It is, in a way, a terrifying thought. What a devotion.

I only have one principle that I have really thought out. One thing that I could actually label principle. It is nothing too grandiose, just my choice not to drink alcohol. But this silly movie character with her capital-P-principle made me question mine. If the chief of a primitive tribe somewhere in the

jungle offered me a drink telling me that not accepting it would hurt him personally and be an insult to the Gods of the tribe, would I still be labelling my choice not to drink alcohol a principle?

Then again, this scenario is like something out of an ethics book. Here's another one of that kind: You may be familiar with the story of a man or woman likewise facing a primitive tribe and its chief. The chief is going to kill ten members of the tribe or, alternatively, let the man or woman kill one and let the other nine go. If you were this man or woman, what would you do? I hope we all agree that to kill is wrong, but what if you killing one person saves nine lives? I certainly have no answer, and there can be no right one, but the question definitely puts "do not kill" in another perspective ? and makes it yet more difficult to have a principle.

But what would life be like, if we didn't even try to have some? I mean, boy, the ethics that would be required of all of us, if someone didn't define a few principles. If no one had ever told you not to lie, not to cheat on your spouse, not to steal and not to kill, what would you do? Would you stop in every individual case to weigh the pros and cons of different choices? And that would be the best solution; more frightening, and more likely, would be not to think, but to do what is most convenient and best suits you.

Principles can, then, be a heightened, enlightened, individual version of society's rules and humanity's morals. They are not just to be talked about when it comes to media or to political leaders, but could add something to our everyday life. Which may sound a bit funny coming from me after I just questioned the possibility of any definite choices without a particular, individual context. Still, I recommend a principle or two. They may not be in vogue, but surely there is a bit of a non-conformist in all of us. Try saying: "I have a principle", (I mean, once you really have one) and feel the rush.

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